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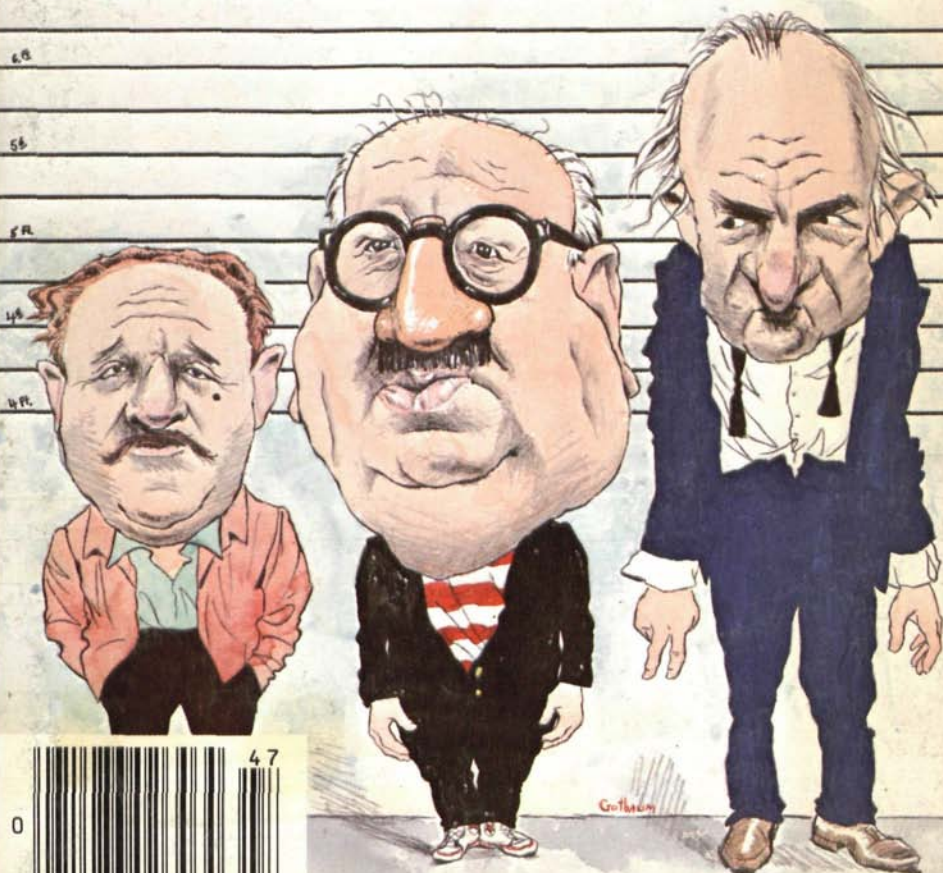
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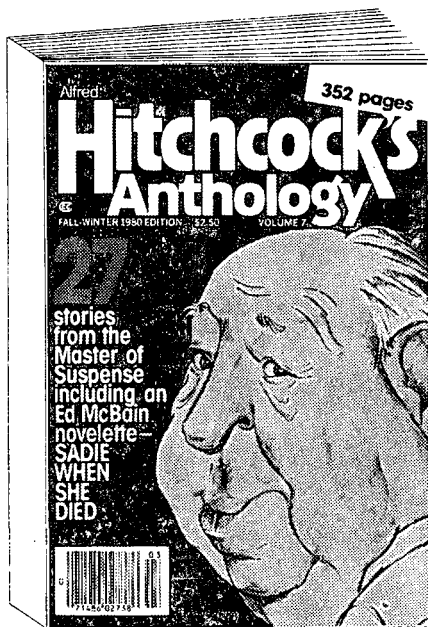
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November 19, 1980



Dear Reader:

In this issue, Connie Trent of the Violent Crimes Squad visits Atlantic City's casinos in Edward D. Hoch's "Captain Leopold's Gamble." Brock takes on a case involving two murders and a missing fortune in Robert Colby's "Paint the Town Gold," and James Holding's Photographer finds a way to double-cross a double-crosser.

You'll pay another visit to Pete's Place in Robert Twohy's novelette, "Putting It on the Line." Gerald Standley introduces you to a man who has to pretend to be "A-Friend of Mario's," and through William Bankier you'll make the acquaintance of a "Crazy Old Woman." In Donald Olson's story you'll meet a frustrated man who always feels that his opponent is "One Jump Ahead."

You may sit down to read these murderous tales on a sunny afternoon or at the darkest hour of midnight, but Gary Alexander's story will remind you that, no matter what time it is, it's always good "Killing Time."

Good reading.

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NOVEMBER 19, 1980

ALFRED

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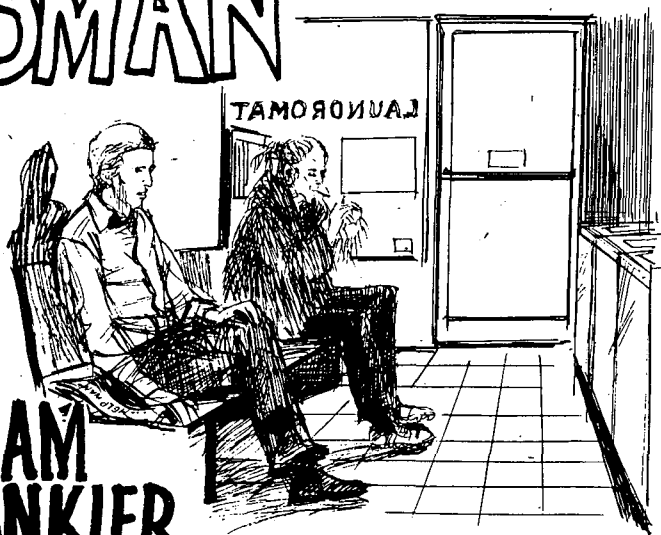
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At Mitchell's age, landing another job wasn't easy . . .

CRAZY OLD WOMAN

by
**WILLIAM
BANKIER**



Danny Mitchell entered the deserted laundrette and chose a machine. Doing his wash at 7:30 in the morning before any of the women arrived was the only triumphant experience of his week since the job failed and Angelica went home. He stuffed his clothes into the machine, poured in detergent powder from a coffee jar, and started the cycle with four ten-penny pieces. Then he sat down on a bench with his back against a dryer to read the employment ads in *The Guardian*.

He could tell within minutes that there were no jobs that appealed to him. The time was drawing closer when he would have to make a choice. Either he could sign on for the dole or he could go in and apply yet again at the office where they placed account executives. The trouble was, he was beginning to look his age. These were bad years in London; advertising agencies were not eager to hire redundant forty-three-year-olds. As for the dole, the amount of the weekly payment would be a laugh. At his peak he had spent more on lunch than he could expect to receive from Social Security.

Mitchell folded the paper and tucked it under his buttock. One thing he would not do was accept Angelica's invitation. When she had left him several months ago, the assumption was that she would return to Montreal. Fair enough. London had not worked and the marriage was on the blink, temporarily if not forever. It made sense that she go back to her hometown and seek the support of friends.

But Baytown was *Mitchell's* hometown. Luke was *his* brother. What right had Angelica to surface in the old house on Albert Avenue? And what made her think he would ever join the two of them there, as if the quiet life back at square one would solve anything? It was madness.

The door of the launderette banged open. Mitchell recognized the woman as she walked in. He had seen her once or twice at The Green Oak, drinking gin and talking to herself. Pub-talking was bad enough but he had observed her once at a bus stop doing the same thing. People waiting for the bus had moved a couple of yards away and were looking interested but slightly alarmed.

"Good morning." He felt required to say that much—their eyes had met.

She performed an elaborate shiver although it was not a cold morning. "I told them I hadn't any reason to think otherwise," she said. She sat down between Mitchell and the door and crossed her legs. Her fur coat, hip-length, had been good at one time. She wore black slacks and brown suede crepe-soled shoes, neatly laced. Her face was mottled pink and white, her grey hair, uncut for some time and combed wet, had been drawn up and back fiercely so that it seemed to be exerting pressure that widened her eyes and lifted the corners of her mouth. She worked at lighting a cigarette. Her knuckles were red.

"In any of these situations," she said, "nobody finds any reason to account for it. I explained to her my grandson will be well taken care of."

Mitchell felt trapped. The wash cycle had barely begun. He would have to wait it out. Then there would be a couple of turns in the dryer—ten minutes each. There was no place for him to dry all his things in the cramped bed-sitter he now occupied.

The only relief was that she didn't seem to require an answer from him. He unfolded his newspaper and pretended to read the account of the Australia-England cricket test. He could feel her eyes on his face. After every two or three sentences of her monologue he would say "Yes" or "Mmmmm." Once in a while he glanced up at her and when he did she looked away. But she went on talking, and nobody else came into the launderette. Mitchell was on his own.

"They keep trying to get their hands on my property. I don't know why they think they have any right. My daughter, for one." Mitchell was transferring his wash to the dryer. He popped ten pence into the slot, closed the door, and the big drum began to rumble as it revolved.

By that time he had become partially accustomed to the woman. He was not quite as frightened of her as he had been at first. It was possible that she was certifiably insane. Clearly she was lonely. But he was beginning to realize she was not dangerous. As for the idea flitting about in the back of his mind, it was so tiny and so new he couldn't yet identify it.

Mitchell found he was making allowances. He remembered the night at The Green Oak when he had seen the woman for the second time. Knowing she was eccentric, he was dividing his time between reading his paper, drinking his beer, eavesdropping on conversations around him in the busy pub, and stealing inspections of her when she wasn't looking his way.

That was when he saw her do the odd thing with the piano. The battered upright in the corner of the room had never been played while Mitchell was in the pub. The patrons threw darts or shot snooker on the table at the back, but mostly they drank and talked. Now this nervous woman, only her good clothes keeping her out of the derelict category, got up from the table where she was sitting alone, wandered to the piano, and raised the lid. Standing, cigarette in one hand, hip cocked, she pressed her other hand down and played one faint chord. It was lost in the roar of conversation.

Nobody paid her the slightest attention. She closed the lid and turned

from the piano with an impatient toss of her head. Mitchell remembered reading that movement as a criticism of the dull party she thought she was attending. None of the stick-in-the-mud guests would join her in a sing-song. To hell with them then. She returned to her table, her gin, and her snappish, incomprehensible remarks tossed here and there about the room at people who always managed to be looking the other way.

"I suppose I'm next in line then." She was not looking at Mitchell now. She was staring through the launderette window at a milk truck laboring up the slope of Leopold Road. "He said to me, Gran, you're going to die."

Mitchell's back was braced against the dryer. He felt its movement and its warmth. He heard himself saying, "Who said that? Your grandson?"

"Yes." She nodded at him, her face drawn and serious. The curious thing was that, given even this small response, she no longer looked crazy. An odd truth occurred to Mitchell: if nobody ever answered anybody, we would all be talking to ourselves.

"How old is your grandson?"

"Seven. His name is Damien. My daughter thinks my solicitor didn't give me proper advice. If three years' consideration isn't enough time to decide as simple a matter as—"

Mitchell interrupted her because she was rambling again. If not certifiable, as he had judged her at first, she was certainly eccentric. His attempt at contact with her had worked. It seemed important for whatever he had in mind to try again. "A boy of seven can be a handful. Damien? I'll bet he's a good kid."

"He's spoiled. The boy needs a father."

Don't we all, Mitchell thought, though not in words as brief or facetious as these. He remembered the old house on Albert Avenue, his mother in one of her hysterical tantrums, his father walking away, refusing to take part. The old man would not or could not confront the articulate, explosive woman in the exchange of curses, arguments, blows—whatever it was she wanted from him.

Old man? A simple realization took Mitchell by surprise. His father, at the time of those chaotic, frightening scenes, must have been about the same age Danny Mitchell was today.

"Well," he said, "I'm sure Damien loves his Gran. He must depend on you all the more."

The dryer stopped turning. And suddenly Mitchell knew what he was

going to do. He shivered with excitement as he folded the warm garments and shoved them into his plastic laundry bag. He was going to be nice to this crazy old woman. It sounded as if she had assets. He was going to ingratiate himself. Nothing wrong with it really; she was lonely.

And then, sometime before the end of three weeks—which was when his redundancy pay from the old job was due to run out—he would ask her to help him. That was the way he would survive. That was how he would avoid dragging himself home, defeated, to Baytown and brother Luke and sweet, beautiful, unbearably sympathetic Angelica.

“I’m just going home to put the kettle on,” Mitchell said to the woman as he stood holding the bag in one hand and the door with the other. “Would you like to come along? Have a cup of coffee?”

Mitchell left her in the kitchenette while he stowed his clean laundry quickly in the bed-sitting room. He came back and put bread in the toaster, found the sticky jar of black-currant jam in the refrigerator, and hurriedly wiped it clean with a sponge before he set it on the table.

He had always been good at breezy, superficial relationships. It was part of his stock in trade as an advertising man. He kept the conversation rattling along as he did an efficient job of preparing the coffee and toast. “I’m between jobs, yes,” he said. “At my age, landing another position isn’t easy, I don’t mind telling you. If I were a copywriter or an artist it would be different. They sit in offices and as long as they can deliver the goods, they can be old, drunk, sick, anything. But I was up front. Everything depended on my personal rapport with the client. When he retired and the new man turned out to have a friend at another agency—there went the account. And, with my company looking for ways to economize, I became expendable.”

“Was that when your wife left you?” The woman’s name was Constance Ward. On the walk from the launderette to his apartment, they had covered the formalities and Mitchell had mentioned Angelica’s departure. Their talk confirmed his earlier observation that her madness became less apparent as long as she had a conversation to hold onto.

“My wife didn’t leave immediately,” he said. “I don’t want to make her sound heartless. Angelica and I were partners through thick and thin. There were tough times for us in Montréal when the French nationalism thing became intense. I lost a good job because I only speak English. We decided to move to London. Toronto was the only other option, and

who wants Toronto?" Mitchell placed the toast and coffee on the table and sat down. "It was good here for years. When my job vanished, we both looked at the situation and came up with different assessments. Angelica thinks small-town Ontario is safer for us. I can't agree. It's only safer if you can see yourself living with it."

Mrs. Ward held a piece of toast between her fingertips and bit it with her lips drawn back revealing discolored teeth with an obvious gap. "You impress me as a man who can take care of himself," she said. "I expect you'll find something soon and your wife will come back."

The milkman rang the bell and Mitchell went to the front door to pay him. While he was out of the kitchen, he heard Constance Ward's voice nattering away, rising and falling as she explained things to her invisible companion.

Before she left, Mitchell made arrangements to see her again. She was a sociable person when she was in this world and she welcomed his attention, noting the rendezvous in a tiny booklet she carried in her handbag. If the weather was fine, they would meet at the entrance of Cannizaro Park for an inspection of the rhododendrons and azaleas. If it rained, they would go elsewhere. Mitchell wrote down her telephone number so he could contact her about any change in plans.

Two days later, Mitchell stood at the entrance of the park in the early afternoon of a delightful day. Only slightly late, she approached from the direction of The Green Oak, clutching her bag under one arm, a lighted cigarette in the other hand, moving at an angle. She stopped in her tracks once or twice and he could see her lips moving.

Mitchell felt dread as she came near him. The image entered his mind of himself embracing her and Constance Ward coming apart in his arms like a cluster of brooms.

Surprisingly, the time spent in the park was very pleasant. As before, she became lucid and organized when he talked to her. The blooms on the flowering shrubs were spectacular and she proved knowledgeable about plants and birds. They ended up sitting on a bench near the pond until the sun was behind a row of trees.

He walked her home. Lake Road was familiar to Mitchell as one of the streets in the community that must have been grand in the past. The houses were large but many of them had been allowed to deteriorate. The Ward residence was one of these; crumbling stone wall, iron gate

hanging open, a view beyond an overgrown front garden of wide steps aslant, peeling columns, a massive oak door suitable for a cathedral. Mitchell thought it looked decrepit but he refused to deduce poverty. It could simply mean that the eccentric owner refused to maintain the place. By extension, this suggested money not spent on repairs was in the bank, piling up interest.

Another image came to him: there were bundles of banknotes inside this haunted house, tucked away in a mattress, crammed into desk drawers. The drawers would not close properly because of all that paper stuffed inside them.

Mitchell stopped looking for a job. He devoted his time and his thought to Constance Ward. A week had passed and he was beginning to feel quite at home with her, excluding the times when his optimism slipped, when he took a head-on look at her and panic ran through him like an electric current.

He had yet to meet the daughter and the grandson, Vivienne and Damien. It might be better if he never did see them but it was inevitable that their paths would cross.

Mitchell's first penetration of the house took place one afternoon after he appeared to run into Constance in the pub. It was no accident; he had actually stationed himself at the foot of Lake Road at eleven that morning and followed her when she came outside and walked to The Green Oak. He gave her five minutes inside before he walked in. She was tossing her head over her glass of gin, raising it to her lips, turning away to say a few words to the space beside her before she drank.

He joined her, making the conversation legitimate and calm. They had a pub lunch for which she insisted on paying with a crisp new ten-pound note. Mitchell had not seen one in some time. The sight of it made him feel secure and kindly.

"Another drink for you, Constance?" he said, just before the call for last orders at two-thirty. "I'm having one."

"Yes, all right. Thank you very much." When he brought the drinks, she said, "I must go directly home after this. Vivienne will be there by now. And Damien."

"How very nice."

"Why don't you come in and meet them?"

He had to get inside the house to be considered a friend eligible for

assistance. Probably he would have to pass Vivienne's inspection, and that of little Damien. "Thanks. I'd like to very much."

The boy turned out to be Mitchell's trump card. This was just as well because Vivienne clearly wanted the Canadian stranger out of the game—certainly out of her mother's house.

But with several beers inside him, Mitchell was suicidally confident. He recognized the reckless mood from experiences in the past with clients; subservient in the morning, he used to bully them after lunch.

"Let me take the boy outside, Viv." (The depressing fact was, she answered to "Viv.") "Come on, Viv—Damien and I are old friends." His trick was to drag in the hated name over and over again. Vivienne sensed what he was doing but he didn't care. "What say, Viv? He won't come to any harm. I'll show him baseball."

"Please, Mummy? I want to know baseball. I'll be the only one at school who does."

"Very well. But don't get all sticky before tea." Vivienne was tall and heavy-legged, with a short haircut and large nostrils. Standing on a parquet floor, she gave the impression of somebody looking down from the back of a horse. There was nothing exotic about her. She was the epitome of everything in a woman that left Mitchell cold. He had married Angelica because she was dark and Mediterranean.

"Good girl, Viv. Come on, Damien."

They spent almost an hour on the back lawn with Mitchell laying out roughly the shape of a baseball diamond, marking the bases with rusting croquet hoops, laid on their sides, that Damien had found in the garden shed. He also turned up an old tennis ball. After a description of the rules of the foreign game, man and boy began to play catch. The lad caught well for his age, so Mitchell was able to extend the distance between them and toss some high ones, which Damien camped under and caught with sure-handed determination. Mitchell realized he was enjoying himself.

They ended up sitting on the concrete rim of a disused fountain. "Some-day you'll come to my place," he said, "and I'll show you the baseball I caught in Jarry Park." He explained how, unlike the situation in a cricket match, many baseballs are used during a game and those that go into the stands are kept by the fans.

His triumph had happened several years ago, not long before he left Montreal. Angelica was at his side as they attended a game between the

Expos and the New York Mets. One of the players hit a line-drive foul, nothing like the sort of pop fly that a dozen people usually congregate beneath, arms reaching up, the ball bouncing away to be retrieved by a boy scrambling under the seats. No, this drive was a "frozen rope," as they say, and as it streaked toward Mitchell, hundreds of people in the rows below ducked their heads. The ball made a sizzling noise as it came at him—he was to think later that a meteor must sound like this. He half stood and raised his hands. There was no time to do anything else. The ball cracked against his palms, his fingers closed, and he had it.

The crowd gave him an ovation. Mitchell tried to appear in control, though he was so overcome with reaction he could hardly breathe. He remembered sitting down, trembling, accepting Angelica's hug. As they left the ball park an hour later, more than one person said, "That's him. There he is." It was one of the outstanding events in Danny Mitchell's life.

Damien was impressed. "Is it like a cricket ball?" he asked. Mitchell had never seen a cricket ball close up. The boy ran and found one in the house and they sat, head to head, in the gathering dusk, while Mitchell held the cherry-red ball and talked about how it differed from a baseball.

Vivienne called them in for tea and as Mitchell strode toward the house, Damien, trotting beside him, took his hand. His mother watched, shielding her eyes against the sun, a calculating expression on her face.

After tea, getting ready to take her son home, Vivienne said, "Can I give you a lift, Mr. Mitchell?"

"No, thanks, Viv. I'm not leaving just yet."

The level expression in her eyes held him for a long moment. Damien was looking up at him too. The old woman was in the other room, her voice fluttering on about solicitors and property. Mitchell felt that he was part of this family now, for better or for worse.

Three days later, days in each of which he had not failed to spend at least a couple of hours with Constance Ward, Mitchell was surprised when Vivienne showed up at his front door. "May I come in?"

"Of course." He was glad this had been his morning for changing the bedsheets. It meant the foldaway was made up, the room reasonably tidy. Still, these were the surroundings of a student, or of a man down on his luck.

Vivienne took in the situation at a glance. She seemed confirmed in

what she had come to say. She refused his offer of a drink and began her interview with a direct question.

"Why are you pursuing my mother?"

Mitchell laughed. "I don't know what you mean."

"My mother is an unstable old woman. I am not blind. You have been around her constantly for a couple of weeks. You're an attractive man. What are you up to?"

"We happened to meet in the launderette. Did she tell you? I like Constance. She's inclined to talk to herself, but that's because she's lonely. I'm able to help her."

"But why?" When he did not answer but stood watching her, hands in pockets; Vivienne opened her handbag. "I don't expect you to admit it, but I know I'm right. You think you'll get some money out of her."

"That's ridiculous."

"So, in order to save you a serious waste of time, let me show you a couple of exhibits. These are bills for back taxes, unpaid. They could soon become a problem for my mother. She may have to sell the house. And this is an estimate for building repairs, too costly and therefore never undertaken." She extended the papers to Mitchell, who glanced at them without taking them. They appeared to be what she said they were. "There is no money," she concluded. "Dig elsewhere, fortune hunter."

When she was gone, Mitchell poured himself a drink. He was not quite shattered, but he felt betrayed. After a second drink, he began to put things into perspective. What the horse-woman said might be true. Then again, it might be a lie. If there was money, she expected it to come to herself and Damien. Every penny of it. Constance had gone on about seeing that her grandson was well taken care of. So Viv's obvious objective was to discourage anybody who might be about to gain favor with her mother.

As for the paper evidence—the tax bills could be first copies. Second or third copies had arrived months later and been paid, possibly from a large sack of gold. The builder's estimate did not mean a thing. Old ladies hated to have dusty men running through the house with hammers and buckets of plaster, disturbing their routine. Viv had probably ordered the repairs and the old girl had vetoed the work.

Mitchell poured himself another double, feeling better by the minute. Of course Constance Ward had money: She was crazy, wasn't she? Nutty as a fruitcake. Poor people, when they go queer, are not tolerated. Rel-

atives have them put away. A person as weird as Constance *must* be rich—otherwise she would never keep her freedom.

Mitchell reminded himself that he had less than a week before his money would run out. Nevertheless, he felt huge, he felt poised. The iron was white-hot and now was definitely the time to strike. He picked up the telephone and dialed Constance's number.

She invited him to come up the hill for a drink because she liked his happy sound on the phone. He brought an unopened bottle of scotch with him, his last one—it seemed like a nice touch. They drank together in the glass conservatory at the back of the house, looking out over the lawn and the concrete fountain. The baseball diamond markings were where he and Damien had left them days ago.

"Why did you give up playing the piano?" he asked.

The question was inspired.

"How do you know I used to play?"

"I can tell."

"My fingers got stiff. I couldn't practice any more. I couldn't do justice to the music."

"A musician's reason," he said. Their heads were close together, resting on the back of the settee. He felt her watching him, so he turned, and there were the green eyes, not as shocked as usual—narrow now, sleepy-looking. There was a vaguely rancid smell about her. Mitchell closed his eyes, held his breath, and kissed her.

Later, when she had fallen asleep, he left the room quietly and moved into the cool, ghostly atmosphere of the silent house. He felt as if he had taken possession. He had a right to be here now; he had paid the price.

Mitchell couldn't remember a time when he had felt weak at the knees as he did now. It must be the whisky. That, and some kind of physical reaction. He was actually hitting walls as he went down the corridor. Peering into one room after another, he had no idea what he was looking for. He received impressions. A cold fireplace full of ashes, charred sticks, scorched newspaper. A round, convex mirror that distorted his face and made him smile. A basket with a lid that he opened to discover knitting needles with a small garment in progress.

He was attracted by the sight of a desk against a broad window. This looked promising. He went closer. There was a radio on the desk, some books, a small cabinet beside it with liquor bottles visible through the

glass door. The location had the appearance of a private command center. This was where she sat and drank and read and did the necessary. Signs of wealth would be found here.

Mitchell went back to the door and closed it. Then he returned to the desk and sat in the leather-upholstered captain's chair. He switched on the radio and heard the insistent thump and shout of disco.

Most of the drawers were empty. But the bottom one on the far side contained a tin box with hasps and a handle on top. As he lifted it and set it on the leather surface of the desk, he had trouble drawing a clear breath.

There wasn't even a lock on it. He unfastened the hasps and lifted the lid. The box was full of brand-new ten-pound notes. They were stacked in there like paperback books. He picked up a sheaf and riffled through them. His estimate of the amount of money in the box was somewhere in the neighborhood of £10,000. Obviously there would be more where this came from. He had been right all along. Constance Ward was wealthy, and Viv knew it. She was trying to discourage him, freeze him out. But there was no longer any chance of that.

Mitchell's first idea was to help himself and run. That impulse lasted less than five seconds. No, he would proceed as planned. His assessment was confirmed; the old woman was a gold mine. And, after today, she was *his* gold mine. He could handle her now, control her. It had not been all that bad with a few drinks first.

And now he could tell smug, successful Luke and play-it-safe, sanctimonious Angelica what they could do with their low-profile existence in Baytown. Danny Mitchell was staying in London for the rest of his life.

The study door opened suddenly and he whirled in the chair. Vivienne advanced into the room. Mitchell turned off the radio and sat sweating, listening to his ringing ears.

"As I thought!" she said triumphantly. "As I bloody well thought!"

"It isn't what you think."

"Where is my mother? Where is she?"

"You lied about the money, didn't you, Viv? Crafty old Viv. You said she was broke."

Damien's voice echoed down the corridor. He sounded more puzzled than afraid. "Mummy, why is Gran sleeping in the conservatory? She hasn't any clothes on."

Vivienne's face went white. She strode toward Mitchell and put her

muscular hands on his shoulders. He felt his shirt tearing. "You rotten bastard. You'd do *that*—"

Hé tried to push her away, fell off balance, and they lurched together into the center of the room. A lamp fell from a table and smashed on the floor.

Damien ran into the room. Mitchell caught a glimpse of his startled eyes. Vivienne was clawing at him, trying to knee him. He drove an elbow into her chest, struggling to protect himself. She gasped and swore.

"Leave my mother alone!" Damien flew at Mitchell and began pounding his leg, kicking him on the ankle. The kicks hurt. Mitchell used a free hand to grasp the boy by the collar and fling him away. He careened across the room, fell into the fireplace, and lay still on the tile.

The fighting stopped. Vivienne was breathing in gasps. Something had caused her nose to bleed. "If you've hurt my son—"

"I didn't mean to. Oh, Christ." Mitchell went to the boy and knelt beside him. He turned him over in the ashes. There was a bruise on the side of his head, but he was breathing. Thank God for that. "He'll be all right."

Mitchell heard Vivienne move up behind him. He distinctly saw the poker lifted from its rack beside his head, but for some reason he did nothing, remaining on his knees beside the unconscious boy, looking at his trembling eyelids, thinking, This must be the way he looks when he's in bed at night. He felt only the first blow on his head and saw with it the brightest light he had ever seen.

Vivienne put Damien to bed upstairs. He complained of a headache. When he asked where Mr. Mitchell was, she told him Mr. Mitchell had gone back to Canada and he was never to mention the man again.

She gave her mother a few hours to come round. Darkness was required anyway for what had to be done next. When she led her mother into the study, Mitchell was wrapped in a tarpaulin brought in from the garage. The cash box was still open on the desk. Vivienne described how Mitchell had been looting it when she caught him.

The old woman seemed to take the situation in stride. She helped her daughter load the body into the station wagon, using the side door away from the street. They drove to the Common, parked, and sat with lights out until there was a quiet period with no cars or walkers in sight. Then they carried the body in the tarp to an open space fifty yards in. They

dumped Mitchell and covered him with leaves, took the folded tarp back to the car, and drove away. He might be found tomorrow, next week, or next month. Person or persons unknown.

Vivienne stayed overnight to make sure Damien was all right. In the morning he was running around as usual so she took him home. Constance stood in the conservatory with a glass in her hand.

"People come and leave a mess in other people's gardens," she said. Her mind wandered. She took a drink. "You can practice the slow passages all you like, but if you can't play the cadenza—"

Later she went into her study and looked at the books on the desk. That was what she had been trying to remember. She had to return a book to the library. She opened the cover and saw in its little pocket the computer card that identified the book as having been checked out on Constance Ward's membership. If she kept it any longer the library would be writing her a letter, and she hated that.

Walking down the hill with the book under her arm, she thought of Danny Mitchell. "I had nothing to give him," she said. "If he wanted to stay, that was all right, but he had no business interfering with my family's happiness."

She said this to some people waiting for a bus. They smiled at each other as she turned the corner.

The key in her handbag belonged to Mitchell. He had given it to her, saying she should feel free to come in and wait for him if ever he was not at home. It seemed a good idea now. She was lonely, and the cup of coffee in his kitchen had been a pleasant experience.

She let herself into the flat, picked up the airmail envelope from the floor beneath the letter slot, and carried it into the kitchen. She called Mitchell's name, but apparently he was out.

She put on the kettle and made two cups of coffee. He might return at any moment.

As she drank her coffee, Constance opened her mail. She read the letter twice but could make no sense out of it. Somebody named Angelica was telling her there was a job waiting in a place called Baytown, as representative for a former client now stationed in Toronto who needed an experienced man to serve the Central Ontario Dairy account. All very confusing. There was a bank draft for five hundred dollars to cover plane fare and expenses.

She finished her coffee, her mind fastening on a different thought every few seconds.

The Green Oak would be opening soon. Constance liked to get in early before the crowd arrived. They were all such snobs, pretending not to hear you when you spoke to them. She got up and stuffed the letter, the envelope, and the bank draft into her handbag, along with Mitchell's key. Then she went to the door and let herself out, leaving her library book on the kitchen table.



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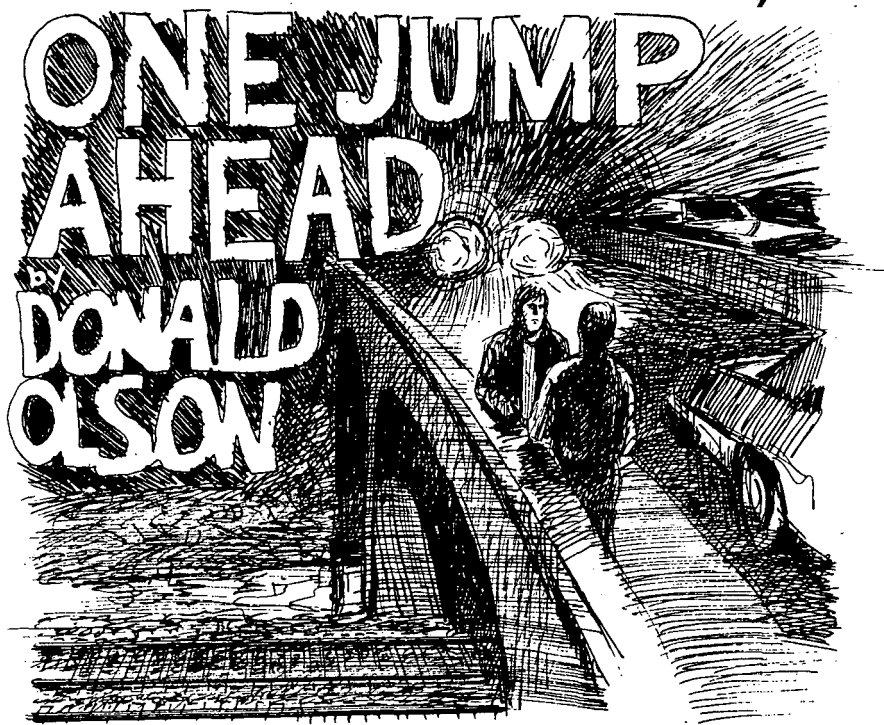
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HOK231

Philip's opponent always seemed one jump ahead of him . . .

ONE JUMP AHEAD BY DONALD OLSON



No matter how clever Philip tried to be, his opponent seemed always to remain one jump ahead of him, until finally, late that spring, Philip decided to end the contest by murdering Edward Jarrett. Only by killing his wife's lover could he be certain that Jarrett would stay out of Grace's life. Philip hadn't been able to prove anything, and yet he knew, by the instinct cultivated through years of living with a woman he adored, that Jarrett and Grace were still seeing each other.

Six months before, when Philip had first discovered what was going on, Grace had denied everything until confronted with indisputable evidence. Then she had broken down and confessed the truth, giving boredom as the excuse for her behavior.

"You're at the office day and night, Philip. And these endless business trips. You've no idea how lonely I've become."

"My dear, if I didn't work day and night Callison Industries wouldn't be a million-dollar business. And you wouldn't be able to live in the style you do."

They had both made promises. He would delegate more work, take fewer trips, spend more time with her. She vowed never to see Edward Jarrett again.

Philip had made a supreme effort to live up to his part of the bargain—yet there were so many matters he couldn't delegate, so many conferences only he could mastermind—and so, whenever he lay sleepless in some distant hotel room, he remained the victim of his suspicions. If he called and found Grace not at home he couldn't help wondering if she was with Jarrett, and he continued to wonder despite her denials. Finally his suspicions became so obsessive he hired a private investigator to shadow Edward Jarrett. But the man's reports were inconclusive. He reported that Jarrett was definitely seeing a woman, but the pair took extreme precautions against discovery, as if they suspected they might be under surveillance.

"Philip, you've become paranoid over this," Grace protested. "I promised you faithfully I wouldn't see Eddie again. Why can't you believe me?"

"Do you want a divorce, Grace? Is that it? Do you want to marry that bum?"

"Oh, darling, how perfectly absurd."

"He hasn't got a dime, you know. He's squandered every cent his family left him."

She nodded sweetly. "And I couldn't bear living in any style but what I'm used to. I admit it. So that should answer your question. Honestly, Philip, I think you should see a doctor. If you ask me, it's all a case of nerves. You've been working too hard for too long. You smoke too much and you don't get enough exercise."

Well, perhaps she was right. Maybe he was letting his imagination work overtime; every other part of him did, and it was beginning to tell.

To humor her he saw their doctor, and the doctor agreed with Grace.

Philip scowled. "If you're going to tell me to get out and jog or play tennis or any of that nonsense, forget it. I'm not the type."

"Then you can at least walk. Take a two- or three-mile walk every night. Get some fresh air in your lungs. It's a terrific way to unwind."

Philip gave it a try. Every night before retiring he left the apartment, walked all the way down Vista D'Oro Boulevard, across the Henry Madison Bridge, through town, and back home by way of the Parkway. At first Grace walked with him, but soon she begged off. She said she got all the exercise she could handle playing tennis at the club. In fact, Philip recalled, it was while playing tennis at the club that she had met Edward Jarrett. She said she no longer played with Jarrett, and Philip's spies had confirmed this. They said Jarrett had canceled his membership when the year was up. It was rumored he'd found the fee too costly.

And yet that damnable instinct of Philip's refused to be satisfied. Grace's behavior seemed to him to be too good to be true. When he happened to catch her in one or two small fibs he was more than ever convinced she couldn't be trusted. He made an even more assiduous effort to spend more time at home.

But, oh, she was clever, she was sly. One day she told him she was driving to Belleville to see her Aunt Janet, only to have Aunt Janet fail to confirm the story when Philip called her. Whereupon Grace told him she had *meant* to visit her aunt but that car trouble had detained her too long at a garage, so she had canceled the visit and not told Philip for fear he wouldn't believe her.

"I *don't* believe you!" he'd raged.

"Then call the garage. Here's the receipt."

But even this didn't satisfy him. He happened to have learned that one of Edward Jarrett's drinking buddies owned the garage.

The situation was all he could think about during his nightly walks. When he threatened to give up the practice, enjoyable as it had become, Grace's scorn made it impossible.

"What are you afraid of, Philip? That Eddie Jarrett might slip over while you're out? Or that I use the time to have nice cozy phone chats with him? Don't be dumb, darling."

So he'd continued the walks, if only to spite her. And it was on one of them that he decided to end the awful uncertainty by killing Edward Jarrett. He was shocked at the ease with which his conscience accepted

this appalling decision. He could only look upon it as a tribute to the depth of his love for Grace.

Now the nightly walks became as pleasurable to the mind as to the body, affording as they did opportunities for contemplating the means and method of murdering his loathed rival. He found it delightful to stroll along, hardly conscious of anything or anyone along his route, his mind immersed in the problem of deciding how to dispose of the offensive Eddie.

Thus preoccupied, he paid scant attention one night as he was crossing the Henry Madison Bridge to a solitary figure leaning upon the parapet midway across the span—no more attention, in fact, than he paid to the three giggling teenagers horsing around a dozen yards or so from this forlorn-looking stranger. Philip's vision was turned inward, fixed upon the handsome, grinning, lecherous face of Edward Jarrètt.

Still, the stranger's presence in the middle of the bridge must have made a subconscious impression on Philip's mind, for he became aware, in crossing the span the following night, that the same man was standing there, palms pressed upon the concrete railing, his body leaning forward as if he were gazing at something far below. This time Philip regarded him with mild curiosity, and might even have spoken a word of greeting had not a young couple pushing a baby carriage paused a few feet away to engage in an argument to which the infant's squalling added a plaintive chorus. Philip moved on.

His astonishment at beholding the same desolate figure loitering on the bridge for three successive nights proved too much for his curiosity, and on the third night only shyness at intruding upon another man's privacy prevented Philip from accosting him. As it happened, however, a car with a flat tire was parked at the curb almost adjacent to the stranger, its young driver in the act of jacking up the right rear wheel while his girl friend sat silently in the front seat. Using this as an excuse to stop, Philip asked the young man if he needed any help.

"Thanks," he said. "I can manage."

Philip stood for a moment, then stepped to the parapet alongside the stranger, who seemed quite indifferent to what was going on behind him.

"Excuse me," said Philip. "Are you O.K.?"

The man glanced at Philip with hardly any expression on his wrinkled, careworn face other than a morose unconcern. "What's it to you?"

"Well, it's only that I walk by here every night and I couldn't help wondering, seeing you here these past few evenings—"

"Maybe I like the view."

Philip looked down at the narrow black ribbon of water and the broader, silvery stream of the railroad tracks. A line of boxcars snaked along one set of tracks, motionless, looking no bigger than toys. Beyond the tracks a row of factories emitted spirals of pale smoke into the dark sky, and in the stillness Philip could hear the soft, dull hum of their machinery.

"Night and the city," he murmured.

"It's a long way down," observed the stranger.

"Scary."

"Oh, yeah."

Behind them the young man was finding it difficult to remove the lug bolts from the wheel of his car. His soft curses voiced his frustration.

"Bad spot for a blow-out," said Philip, but the gloomy man seemed unconcerned with anything but the scene below.

"It looks," he said, "like a kid's train set."

"You like trains?"

Instead of addressing himself to the question the man said, "I wonder how deep the water is."

"Not very deep. But very dirty."

"It wouldn't matter how dirty it is." And then, as if calculating some mathematical problem, he said, "Most likely I'd land on the tracks."

Philip felt a curious excitement, for the man's words, spoken in such a morbid tone, expressed so clearly the speculation behind his own curiosity. A solitary man, drawn night after night to the same spot in the middle of a bridge, could suggest but one thing. Philip looked at the man's dark profile. "You're not thinking of that, I hope."

"Jumping, you mean?"

"It would be a hell of a way to die."

"One way's as good as another."

Philip wondered why he felt so urgent a concern for this stranger. Was it only to prove to himself that he wasn't a monster of insensitivity? That even while he contemplated murder he could feel human compassion?

"Things are never that bad, friend."

"Says who?"

"Do you care to talk about it?"

For the first time the man looked around at the youth still struggling

to remove the wheel, and he lowered his voice as if he were ashamed of being overheard. "Buddy, I'm all talked out."

"Be honest with me. Are you really thinking about—doing that?"

"I've been thinking about it for days."

"It's a coward's solution."

"It's a *solution*."

Philip tried a harder line. "Then why haven't you done it?"

"I keep trying to get up the nerve. Night after night."

"But *why*? What could be that hopeless?"

"Life."

"But life changes. Everything passes."

"Some things don't."

"Such as?"

"Sickness," the man replied dismally.

"Is that it?"

"That's it."

A wave of sympathy moved Philip to place a hand on the man's shoulder. "Can't anything be done?"

The stranger uttered a humorless laugh. "I don't mean that kind of sickness. I mean I'm sick of life. Sick of being alone."

"Haven't you anyone?"

"Not any more."

"But you're not old. You look strong. You could work. Work is the best therapy in the world for loneliness."

"Oh, I work. Now and then."

Philip felt a rising compulsion to help this poor creature. Suddenly his own problems seemed almost trivial. He had money, health, a beautiful wife—a wife he loved, even if she *was* faithless—a good business, a luxurious apartment, fine cars. "I'd like to help you," Philip said.

"You can't. It's too late."

"It's never too late."

Behind them the young man uttered a truly savage curse, then yelled at the girl in the car. "Honey, I can't get this damn thing off! I'm gonna have to walk into town and call a wrecker—You stay here!"

Philip smiled at the man beside him. "See? You're not the only one with problems."

"That's a problem? A lousy flat tire?" The man sounded angry now, not just hopelessly bitter.

"Well, we've all got troubles—of one kind or another."

The man's gaze strayed over Philip's slim figure, noting the expensive haircut, the cashmere sweater, the costly slacks and shoes. "Yeah, I bet you got troubles."

"I do," Philip assured him. It felt good to open up to someone, someone he didn't know. "I've got a wife I love very dearly. Only she's been seeing another man. Running around behind my back."

The other man was unimpressed. "At least you've got a wife. I've got no one."

"You've got yourself. You owe yourself something, don't you?"

"Yeah. A way out."

Philip thought about Grace waiting at home. He'd already been gone longer than usual, and he began to consider what she might be doing. His anxiety to get home prompted him to rationalize his concern about the stranger. The fellow had been loitering here in this same spot for three weeks. If he'd actually intended to jump, wouldn't he have done it by now?

Philip laid a comradely hand on the man's shoulder. "Think about it, my friend. Don't do anything you won't be able to regret. Give it more time."

With this, he said good night and walked sprucely on across the bridge. But as he walked he found himself dwelling hardly at all on Edward Jarrett, so compelling were his thoughts about the man he'd left behind. Their conversation echoed in his mind and the hypocrisy of his own attitude filled him with disgust. Mingled with his pity had been a subtle contempt for the fellow's spinelessness. Life changes, he'd preached to the man, all things pass. If he himself truly believed that, would he be plotting to take another man's life, especially the life of someone as reprehensible as Edward Jarrett? In the long run, would a woman like Grace entertain more than a passing affection for such a nobody? So Jarrett was younger, possibly more handsome—Grace was intelligent enough to recognize temporary attractiveness. And why not be honest with himself? He had no concrete evidence whatsoever that the affair was not in fact ended.

The man on the bridge haunted him all the way home. He thought of returning home by the way he'd come on the chance the fellow was still loitering there but by now he was on the Parkway and too weary to retrace his steps . . .

"Philip, you've been gone so long," said Grace as he let himself in, "I was just about to go looking for you."

The note of concern sounded genuine, and he was more ashamed than ever.

"Were you really?"

"Yes! All sorts of thoughts went through my mind—you're such a creature of habit I couldn't believe you'd decided to stop off somewhere!"

"I was held up. I helped a guy change a tire."

"Don't you want to know what I've been doing while you've been gone?"

"No, my darling, I do not."

"Or have you hired another detective to keep an eye on me?"

He didn't allow this to ruffle him, but smiled instead and admired the picture she made, reclining prettily on the divan in front of the fireplace.

"Don't be silly, Grace. Look, I'm sorry. Maybe I've finally begun to realize how unfair I've been."

She regarded him questioningly. "Do you really mean that?"

"I do, yes. I swear it."

She seemed to be searching his face for some indication of insincerity, and he thought of confessing to her the singularly affecting influence of his encounter with the man on the bridge. Yet he found it too complex to put into words. He felt guilty now that he hadn't made a greater effort on the man's behalf. Even now the police might be recovering the poor fellow's body, bloody and broken, from the railroad tracks beneath the bridge.

He had a hard time falling asleep that night.

The image of the stranger's face haunted him the following day. When he started out upon his walk that night he wasn't sure which would prove more of a relief, to encounter him once more or not to find him at that same spot on the bridge. The magnitude of the man's despair had by now reduced his own uncertainties about Grace to the merest shadow.

As he left the residential area behind him and approached the bridge, he peered anxiously through the scarves of mist rising from the river below. The night was cool and he was glad he'd worn a suede jacket over his sweater. The mist grew thicker as he proceeded across the bridge and therefore the sudden emergence of that familiar figure took him somewhat by surprise.

Joyfully, Philip advanced upon him. The man turned to greet him. "Oh, it's you again, is it?"

"Makes you believe in fate, doesn't it?"

"You could call it that."

"Anyway, I'm glad to see you haven't got up your nerve to do something foolish."

The man gazed for a moment over the parapet. "Maybe it's not altogether a question of nerve."

"Well, I'm not leaving you tonight until I've talked some sense into you." Philip took his place beside the stranger. For a minute or so, neither man spoke. Then, looking about him, the man drew back, and stooped as if to pick something up from the sidewalk. Before Philip had any idea what was happening he had been gripped around the knees, bodily lifted, and shoved forward over the parapet.

The stranger gazed down upon the lake of mist obscuring the exact spot where his victim had landed. Not that it mattered—no one could survive that fall. Then, humming to himself, he proceeded across the bridge, glad to have an end to these nightly vigils, happy that on this fourth night no one had come along to interfere with his job. No teenage boys, no squabbling couple with their bawling baby, no idiot with a flat tire. Having picked the perfect spot to kill his victim, he hadn't expected he'd have to wait quite so long for the perfect opportunity.

He walked faster now, eager to reach a phone and inform the lady who had hired him that he would be around to collect his money.

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Toler had the power of turning the Vietnamese family once more into displaced persons . . .

KILLING TIME

by
**GARY
ALEXANDER**



Don Toler despised Vietnamese food. The watery soups; the strange meat-and-vegetable combinations; the *nước mam*, a pungent fish sauce the Vietnamese doused everything in, like Americans and their catsup: Toler hated it all. Almost every month, right after the arrival of his disability pension check, Toler took a meal at a Vietnamese restaurant. He lived in a city with a large Vietnamese refugee community, so there were several places to choose from.

Toler had covered this ground with a succession of Veterans' Administration psychiatrists. They agreed that he suffered either macabre twinges of nostalgia or further manifestations of chronic masochism. Toler didn't argue with their ten-dollar words or their conclusions. He didn't give a damn.

Tonight's meal was semi-Westernized, mild and nearly palatable. This new café, the Hai Ba Trung, was no storefront conversion like most. New construction, gaudy plastic, and the smell of Lysol gave it the ambience of a hamburger franchise. Its name, though, seemed not to fit its atmosphere. Hai Ba Trung: the three Trung sisters. Way back when, they had led a revolution that drove out the Chinese or some such foreign devils.

Toler raised his latest drink to a passing waitress. "Brave little cookies they were."

"Beg pardon, sir?"

He couldn't clarify it even if he were sober. She probably spoke little English, and he had learned only enough Vietnamese to negotiate the price of food, drink, and sex.

"Never mind, honey. The check, please."

Toler made his way to the cashier's counter, listing to port. The V.A. people had nagged him about that too. Even though it had been fifteen years, he had one artificial leg and some permanent loss of extension in the other; he shouldn't expect to get around normally when he was pickled.

A new cashier greeted him. The young woman dressed in the traditional *áo dài* had been replaced by a chubby, prosperous-looking man in a leisure suit. The American Dream, Toler thought cynically. He must be the owner. The man glanced at Toler, then averted his eyes. "You enjoy meal, sir?"

Toler stared at him. Fifteen years or fifteen seconds, he would never forget the face of the one who had cost him a leg, a flying career, and much more. Like Toler, the man was older, heavier, dappled with grey, but unmistakably Nguyen Van Duc.

Or was he? Another homily of the V.A. physicians: cut back on the sauce or the nightmares would also become long-running daytime productions.

Toler closed his eyes for a moment. "Yeah, I did. Haven't we met?"

"No, sir. I live in California since I come to America. Just move here two months ago to open restaurant."

"I mean in Saigon. A long time ago."

"Oh, no, sir," the man said, looking down, concentrating a bit too hard on a stack of dinner checks. "I live in Nha Trang, come to Saigon just before fall of government, get out on one of last planes."

"Sure," Toler said, leaving him his coin change. "My mistake."

Toler let it drop for the time being and drove home. Home, now, was a furnished room in a section of town that hadn't been fashionable since Wendell Willkie was good copy. He trudged up four flights of stairs, considering the absurd probabilities of former Lieutenant Donald Toler meeting after a decade and a half Nguyen Van Duc, Vietcong sapper extraordinaire, over a cash register and a toothpick dispenser.

He fumbled for his skeleton key, also considering the equally impossible odds of Karen taking him back again. About as good as growing a new leg. Six months ago he had staggered home one night and found his luggage on the front steps. It seemed that she felt little things like sobriety and a steady job were important in a marriage. No sense of humor; must be that women's lib business.

Toler got the door open, smiling at his private quip. He broke the seal on a bottle of what was not Kentucky's finest and flopped on his bed. He took a long pull, sat up, glared at the dresser mirror. Lovely piece of furniture, lovely decor provided for his seventy bucks a month. Very fashionable: Early Cold War.

You're lovely too, Toler, he thought, locked on the image. He saw a face florid and lined, puffy from booze, etched with unresolved grievances, galloping into middle age.

You're the same as Nguyen Van Duc, he told the image. Same but different. Both casualties, both moving with the times. Duc worries about IRS audits, you worry about cirrhosis of the liver. Everyone has their woes.

Toler laughed without mirth and collapsed on his pillow, enveloped in 1964.

He had graduated in engineering, joined the Army, breezed through flight school, and welcomed his assignment to Vietnam. Toler served there before the ponderous American build-up, before the war had reached critical mass. GIs in that era served as advisors to the South Vietnamese military or belonged to aviation units that taxied local soldiers

to battle areas. Toler was assigned to the latter as a pilot of an observation plane.

His reports of possible enemy positions were passed on to helicopter teams who ferried Vietnamese troopers in to engage the enemy. His company was located near a village in the Central Highlands. One of the guys had erected a signpost: SAN FRANCISCO, 10,305 MILES. From outside the mess hall on clear days, Toler could see hills inside Cambodia.

In the dry season, he lived with dust, boredom, and occasional terror. In the monsoon season, he lived with mud, boredom, and occasional terror. The men in his unit took turns flying to Saigon to "chase down supplies." When Toler's name came up, he conducted most of his military business, as did the others, from the interiors of bars, quasi-French restaurants, and whorehouses. Saigon still carried the label of the Paris of the Orient, but after a day of sightseeing in a pedicab the charm of the city seemed best appreciated from indoors. Fascination for colonial decay quickly wore thin.

The afternoon before his flight back to base, Toler killed time in a bar, one hand wrapped around a bottle of the potent Biere 33. Solitude and alcohol had a clarifying effect on the war. Toler, even then, was a fan of ironies.

In 1964, guerrilla bombings of bars and billets in Saigon presented greater peril to an American than isolation in the field. Soldiers and officers with pull had wangled duty in town, eager to trade the risk for clean sheets and the prospect of twelve months of glorious dissipation. Toler had observed these desk jockeys, had seen them prowling the streets of Saigon in search of parts for their air-conditioners and discreet cures for venereal disease.

War is hell, he thought, settling up. He had scant time remaining to check out of the hotel, catch a taxi, and make Tan Son Nhut Airport through the chaotic traffic before the plane left without him.

He swiveled on the barstool, seeing the two Vietnamese who had entered shortly after him—one young, about his age, one almost ancient. The kid had walked in with a package and joined the old guy at a booth. Their conversation was nervous and agitated, and even if it had been any of his business, he couldn't understand a word of it.

What was his business was the kid, who was also leaving. *Without* his package. The Headquarters ticket-punchers he had met had taught him one thing about Saigon: when you see a local waltz into a GI bar with

something under his arm, you make damn sure he leaves with it or find out the reason why. Toler was not thrilled about being in the middle of a plastique explosion. A eulogy in *Time* magazine would be no consolation.

Toler snagged his arm as he walked by. "Didn't you forget something?"

The Vietnamese shrugged. "No speak English."

Toler saw the old man striding for the back door without the package.

"Me go, O.K.? Late."

"I don't think so."

The Vietnamese gave Toler a hard shot in the midsection with his elbow and ran. Several other Americans and a pair of Aussies with bush hats also occupied the bar but were too involved with bar girls to notice.

Toler grabbed for the Vietnamese, screaming, "Bomb, bomb!"

The other patrons flew out the back door. Toler charged, dove, tackled the Vietnamese. He wanted out, but he also wanted the V.C. Toler caught a forearm against the neck and released his hands, but lunged again for the terrorist at the door. This time, on the sidewalk, Toler had a firm anklehold, but he was still halfway in the bar. The bomb went off.

After several weeks in an Air Force hospital in the Phillippines, Toler was strong enough to be shipped home for prosthetic fitting and subsequent discharge.

"I want to stop over in Saigon for a few days," he told the Air Force liaison officer. "I'll need some clothes and a pair of crutches."

The officer's eyes widened. "What for? Haven't you had enough of Vietnam?"

"I have my reasons." Toler, already bitter, had read that the Saigon regime was publicly executing captured guerrillas and merchants who hoarded rice to spike the price. They wanted to set examples, and his friend in the bar was surely a prime candidate. Toler hoped for good timing and a fifty-yard-line seat.

"Well, I don't know. I have this schedule for you. Your Purple Heart and Silver Star. The ceremony's all set up at the Presidio."

From the American standpoint, the war was still young. Toler, a hero and a maimed one at that, was something of a celebrity at the hospital, and possessed much more clout than the average second lieutenant.

"They can shove their medals," he said. "When can you book me out?"

An officer from the Provost Marshal's office met Toler's plane at Tan Son Nhut.

"What do you know about our friend?" Toler asked.

"Not much, except his name is Nguyen Van Duc and he has a hand in the black market—illegal currency transactions mainly. Street trading of U.S. green for piastres. The usual. We don't have anything concrete linking him to the Cong, but that's not unusual. Who can tell who the good guys and bad guys are? It's crazy."

"They haven't stood him up against any sandbags yet, have they? I'd hate to miss it."

The officer's hands were in his back pockets. He was looking down, nervously scuffing his boots on the macadam. "Well, actually, he—uh—escaped."

"What?"

"We don't know what actually happened. The local gendarmes—they aren't exactly Scotland Yard. Maybe they botched it or maybe some palms were greased. The latter's possible. Duc was into the black market up to his elbows, and a hundred bucks is a fortune to some jailer who gets ten bucks a month."

"He wasn't arrested for a parking violation, you know," Toler stammered. "The little bastard cost me a flying career. What are you doing about it?"

The officer shrugged. "All we can. An official protest is being sent through channels, but our relationship here is delicate."

Toler turned from him, hobbling to the terminal, outraged and feeling impotent. Fifteen years later, those emotions scarcely diminished, Toler had drunk his way out of a succession of engineering jobs and a marriage to Karen, a mortal with a finite supply of patience. The drafting boards he hunched over in his jobs lacked wings, engines, and cockpits. His wife lacked a degree in psychiatry or the power attributed to Lourdes.

Toler wallowed contentedly in the media's stereotype of the Vietnam vet: alienated, unadaptable, alcoholic, drug-dependent, borderline psychotic. Snap out of it, they had advised; develop goals and purposes.

Toler lurched over to the corroded sink and emptied the remaining whiskey. I have a goal now, he thought, but one that requires a clear head.

The following afternoon, Toler parked at the nearest corner to the Hai Ba Trung, awaiting Duc. Duc arrived about lunchtime, entered, and stayed until the restaurant's ten o'clock closing. Toler followed him home,

struggling to keep pace with Duc's freshly minted Toyota in his aging Plymouth. They said the slant-six engine lasted virtually forever; Toler was putting that claim to a severe test.

Duc lived in a townhouse-style apartment located in a nebulous region that was neither city nor suburb. It was relentlessly middle-class, with neat, competitive yards and swept driveways. Not rich, not poor; highly inconspicuous.

Toler wrote down Duc's address and the next morning dropped in on David Stone, an old buddy from flight school. Stone was presently division claims manager for a major insurance company, a position with ample investigative resources.

Toler considered phoning ahead for an appointment, but quickly discarded the idea. The last time they'd gotten together they'd enjoyed a long liquid lunch. Toler vaguely recalled stiffing Dave for the check and then hitting him up for a loan. When he had called after that, some secretary or another had locked him on hold.

Toler saw from Stone's face that it wasn't a pleasant surprise. "Don—ah—good to see you. You're looking good."

Toler did look relatively good: clean-shaven, sober, wearing his best slacks and shirt. He decided against small talk and the swapping of war stories. A Silver Star was good for only so much mileage and, damn, he would offer to repay that loan if he could just remember how much it was.

"You're busy, Dave. I'm just in and out. I do need a favor."

Stone blanched, offered Toler a cigarette. "Don't we all. Marcie begins at Stanford this fall. What they want for a year's tuition you could buy a whole college for twenty years ago."

Toler held up his hands in mock surrender. "Not money, Dave. A little information. O.K.?"

Stone studied the address Toler gave him. "A Vietnamese guy I once knew. I'd appreciate it if you could give me a short biography from that. He owns a café in town."

"Old friend from Nam?"

"Not really."

Stone pressed a buzzer. A young woman took the address and instructions to get right on it. Five minutes later she returned, ending strained chunks of silence and the smallest of small talk.

Stone read, then reported. "His name is Vo Dong Giang. Before the

collapse, he lived in Nha Trang with his family. He's thirty-nine—our age. He had an import-export business there, fled a few days before the barefoot Marxists had a chance to teach him about dialectic materialism. Solid non-citizen. His restaurant is mortgaged but he's not wearing it around his neck. Never took a dime from Uncle except for the plane trip to the Land of the Big PX. Why the curiosity?"

Toler stood and shook Stone's hand. "You don't want to know."

For the next week, Toler surveyed Duc and his family. Their routines had a timeclock quality, from Duc to Mrs. Duc to the elderly lady—the mother or mother-in-law—to the four children who ranged in age from teenager down to preschooler. The kids, especially, evoked uncomfortable images. They were delicate, beautiful, slated to be innocent victims. Of what, he wasn't sure yet. He could pauper them, orphan them, or once more turn them into displaced persons.

The easiest solution would be to call Immigration and demand an investigation of Duc/Giang. But no. So he was deported? We tolerated refugees who had a past of high-level venality and cruelty, since it was of the anti-communist variety. We might also tolerate a Vietcong alumnus, letting bygones be bygones. Immigration would understand, knowing that many who had paid their dues as southern guerrillas had no more use for Hanoi domination than the U.S.-backed Saigon regime. Born-again capitalists; an evangelical sympathy might emerge. And even if he got the boot, Duc sure as hell knew how to turn a dollar. If he was shipped off to Canada or France, he'd once again land on his feet, forever beyond Toler's grasp.

Extortion and murder loomed as more attractive alternatives. In that order. Toler mulled too long over these choices, picking distractedly at his fingernails. He glanced up from behind the steering wheel and saw Duc and his family staring at him from their front yard.

Toler, a voyeur without passion, had spent too much time parked down the street. He had become a neighborhood regular but he didn't deliver the milk or the mail. He accelerated away, still without a solid plan.

Toler climbed his steps, fatigued from a morning of calisthenics in the park. He had sworn off cigarettes and limited his drinking to a beer or two as a reward after a heavy workout. One did not fight a war flabby and bleary. He hit the sheets, eager for a nap.

Someone pounded on his door. Nobody had called on Toler lately except his landlord when the rent was late. Toler squinted through the peephole. The hallway light was sufficient to distinguish two young Oriental men. He saw their eyes, feline and menacing.

Toler went to his bed and reached under his mattress. Besides his injuries and his pension, Toler had left the Army with his service pistol. They knocked again, so hard the door vibrated in its sash. Toler yanked the slide of the .45, depositing a round in the chamber.

They beat on the door once more, even harder. Toler dropped to his remaining knee, aimed, and waited. Cowboys, they called them in Saigon; teenaged boys, aimless draft dodgers who prowled the streets on their motorbikes, available for anything, finding violence a welcome diversion from poverty and boredom.

They knocked again, chattered to each other in Vietnamese, then descended the stairs. Toler, trembling, unchambered the round, pulled the clip. Duc, evidently, felt he needed to be discouraged. If he could home in on Duc, why not the reverse?

Toler checked his door lock, propped a chair against it for good measure, then broke down his pistol, cleaning and lubricating each part. He knew that he had better take control before Duc did. In a guerrilla war, the insurgents made the rules, set the order of battle.

"Hello, Hai Ba Trung."

"Vo Dong Giang, please."

"Yes, me."

"Or is it Nguyen Van Duc?"

After a pause, "Sorry—no understand. No speak good English."

"We had a similar conversation fifteen years ago in that bar, Duc, just before the big bang," Toler answered.

"Sorry—no understand."

"The Pastime Tavern on Pine Street. Meet me there in one hour and come alone with all the cash you have in the till. Comprehend?"

"Sorry."

Toler hung up and drove to the Pastime. He was only mildly surprised when Duc arrived and joined him.

"No more games, Duc. We have a lot of catching up to do."

"I know no such person as Duc," he said. "I only come because you follow me all over. I need to know how I offend you."

"Is that why you sent the cowboys to my room? Idle curiosity?"

The Vietnamese laughed. "Cowboys? No. Nephews. I asked them to talk to you, find out why you hang around all the time."

"Cut the V.C. crap, Duc," Toler demanded, tapping his plastic leg with his beer glass. "You gave me this and the account is overdue."

"Vietcong, no. I loyal to America. I am businessman, here and there. I like money, not politics."

"Money is fine for openers. Did you bring it?"

The Vietnamese passed an envelope under the table. Toler checked it. There was a stack of tens and twenties.

"That's O.K. for a down-payment. It'll keep me from picking up the phone for a while."

The Vietnamese pointed a finger at Toler. "That's all I pay! I no understand why you hate me. You confuse me with somebody else. I pay one time for you to go away. I am alien. Maybe you tell lie and they take my business license. I no want to shut down restaurant."

Toler pointed a finger back. "Don't bet on it. A couple of hundred bucks is a drop in the bucket for the score we have to settle."

The Vietnamese stood up. "I warn you!"

"Have a nice day, Duc."

Toler stayed until he finished his beer. He was uneasy and depressed; the glow of vengeance he had expected did not materialize. He ordered another beer, but walked out after a couple of sips. It didn't taste good any more.

He went to his car, parked along the side of the building. He unlocked it, started inside, then saw smears of red liquid everywhere—seats, headliner, dashboard. It looked like the scene of a gang war.

It smelled familiar. Toler tasted a drop. Catsup. Hai Ba Trung catsup, no doubt. Duc's warning was hardly subtle or inscrutable.

Karen was civil, almost friendly, when he called on her. "But I wished you'd phoned first. The girls would like to see you but they're in school now."

"I was afraid you'd have an excuse—something else to do," Toler said.

Karen sighed. "You have rights, Don. I've never tried to take them away from you. Anyway, they'll love the presents, especially the typewriter for Debbie. She graduates this year, you know. It'll come in handy in college."

"I know she graduates, Karen. I remember. I'm not that much of a derelict."

"Stop it! I didn't imply that you were. In fact, you look better than you have in ages."

Don smiled. "Exercise and a solid rather than liquid diet will do that. Do I look as good as I used to?"

Karen immediately caught his drift, got up, and poured more coffee. "Yes and no."

"Explain."

She fidgeted with the sugar bowl, her back to him. "Physically, yes, but there's something else. In your eyes."

"At least they're not bloodshot," he joked.

Karen spun around. "But they're cold, the same as they were when you came home from overseas, before the self-pity set in."

Toler made his excuses and drove off. The old poison, he thought; Karen complained of it years ago. I can live with anything but that, she had said: your brain must be white-hot with hatred. Of course she couldn't live with all his other problems either, as hard as she tried, but those she attempted to deal with. The bile and the rage were beyond her. But with Duc gone, he decided, so might depart the venom.

Toler hadn't the vaguest idea how to kill someone and get away with it. His Army training was of little value; they had taught him how to fly light aircraft, not how to throttle café owners.

He kept tabs on Duc, with no interest in concealing his presence. The hell with nickel-and-dime blackmail. He would torment him instead, while waiting for the proper inspiration. And, with a little luck, Duc might strike first. Toler was ready and eager to counterpunch. He had begun lifting weights. He hadn't touched a drop in days. His .45 was never beyond his reach.

He got lucky in an unexpected way. On a morning drive up Duc's street, he passed as the former guerrilla's family prepared to leave for a trip, their Toyota bulging with baggage and people—everyone but Duc, who was saying his farewells.

Toler got out of there fast, the scenario shaping in his head. It was Friday, and obviously the Duc clan was off to visit friends or relatives for the weekend. Another large city, a hundred miles south, also had a sizeable Vietnamese community. A little weekend holiday, with Duc

remaining behind because of the demands of the business. Alone for three days.

Toler crisscrossed the streets to the rear of Duc's home. Directly behind him was several acres of woods. Developers had slashed through the forest with streets and underground utility hookups, but tight money had forced them to pull out before building a single house. It looked to Toler like an invisible ghost town. He stopped at the end of one cul-de-sac, walked not fifty yards through brush before he came upon Duc's back fence.

Toler returned to his room and cleaned his weapon twice. The hands on his watch appeared to be almost static. The sun moved toward the horizon at a leisurely pace, eventually dropping out of sight.

He eased the reluctant Plymouth over a curbing, coaxing it through the trees, out of sight. The chest-high cedar fence was a challenge for any amputee, but Toler, sober and taut, aided by adrenalin and hatred, scaled it easily. It was about nine, an hour prior to Duc's usual arrival from the Hai Ba Trung. No lights on in the back of the house; none at the immediate neighbors' either. A piece of cake. Plenty of time to contrive a household accident or, better, squeeze off a round through a pillow after listening to Duc beg for his life. War, as they say, is hell.

Toler tried the patio door. Surprisingly, it was unlocked. He stepped into the kitchen and heard noise, saw a sliver of light from the front of the house. He took the .45 from his belt and froze. The TV: grunts, groans, and the breathless commentary of professional wrestling. Evidently Duc had neglected to shut it off before leaving for the Hai Ba Trung. Hadn't he heard of the energy crisis?

Toler pushed open the living-room door and saw a pair of mastodons on the screen locked in an unfriendly embrace. And also his quarry, splayed in a recliner.

Duc jumped up. Toler motioned him back down with the barrel of his pistol.

Duc cupped his ears. "Sorry the sound turned up so high, but when that bomb go off, I too am victim. Eardrums never the same afterward."

Toler cocked the hammer. "My heart bleeds."

"Before you do," Duc pleaded, "please let me talk. You got all kind of time. Family gone until Sunday night. Please!"

Toler eased onto the sofa. "Go ahead."

"You correct. I am Nguyen Van Duc. You wrong too. I no V.C. I no set off bomb. I very happy in black market, inake much money, leave politics for other crooks."

Toler squinted an eye, sighting between Duc's. "Am I correct in assuming that the package you brought into the bar was full of chocolate-chip cookies? Something you were delivering for a bake sale? If you pray to anybody, now might be the time."

"You right and you wrong. I make fine money changing currency. This new guy I work for I no like. He tell me to take bundle of greenbacks to that bar, give to other guy. I think it dollars on way to France, Red China, wherever. None of my business. Politics in Vietnam funny. One day for money, next day for favorite leader. Funny. I find out like you that it not twenties, it plastique. My new boss not nifty guy. I get sprung of jail paying much money. Easy to do if you got some tucked aside. Then I go Nhà Trang, up on coast. Lovely beach there. I sneak out family, get fake ID. Nobody bother me until Hanoi tanks. I come Saigon. Then here."

"Wild story," Toler said. "And how do you happen to be home now? Who's cooking the fishheads and rice?"

"I show you." Duc shouted something in Vietnamese. A few seconds later, he repeated it.

A door adjoining the small dining room opened. Toler leaped up and aimed his weapon. A fraction of an ounce more pressure on the trigger and he would have shot a beautiful, sleepy-eyed little Vietnamese girl, about four, as she ambled out with a yawn and a teddy bear.

Duc nodded. "I take chance. I know you no can do. In Vietnam I know many soldier, GI and ours. Some blast at anything that move. You no kill anything. I know."

The child cuddled on her father's lap, struggling to stay awake. "Kim, the baby. She have fever bug, cannot go with family to see wife's cousin. I babysit. I have brother who take over at Hai Ba Trung tonight."

Toler was seated on his .45. He fought tears, desperately damming the impending flood. Don Toler came to pieces for *nobody*—wife, kids, V.A. shrink, least of all for this whatever-he-was.

Duc kissed his daughter and sent her back to bed. Then he got up and held out his hands to Toler. "Look. Like a baby's. Not a Front cadre's." He slapped his gelatinous midriff. "The hard body of revolutionary? You got to be kidding. My war in black market, not in jungle. Everybody over

there get screwed. You got double dose, so you kill me. You call authorities, say I am Nguyen Van Duc, it all over."

Duc patted his temple. "You blow whistle, I lose everything. Better you do this way. I got Prudential for wife and babies. Maybe better you waste me."

Toler stuffed the weapon in his belt. He rose and glared at Duc, without a word to say.

"They get your leg partly because of me. I owe you."

"Could be—maybe not," Toler said shakily. "If you didn't plant the bomb you didn't plant the bomb."

Duc leaped up and hugged Toler. "You good man, Toler."

Toler pushed him back and laughed. "Fifteen years of hating who you might be, and we wind up like Astaire and Rogers."

Duc backpedaled. "I do bad thing *again*?"

"I have to admit I wouldn't have accepted your invitation if you hadn't sounded different. A kind of different that I used to dream about—if that makes any sense," Karen said.

Toler nodded and took a long pull on his Coke. He couldn't deny that he had changed. His old commanding officer, who was an engineering veep for a local aerospace firm, had taken him on again. He had already hired and fired Toler twice, but had agreed to another shot, even advancing the money that paid for the new slacks and sweater Toler wore tonight.

"How do you like it?"

"Fine, even that fish-sauce stuff."

"*Nước mắm*," Toler said. "They use it on everything. Another drink?" he added.

"Well, maybe just one."

Toler signalled for a waitress, got instead a pudgy Oriental with a bundle of menus under his arm.

"Is everything all right, Mr. Toler?"

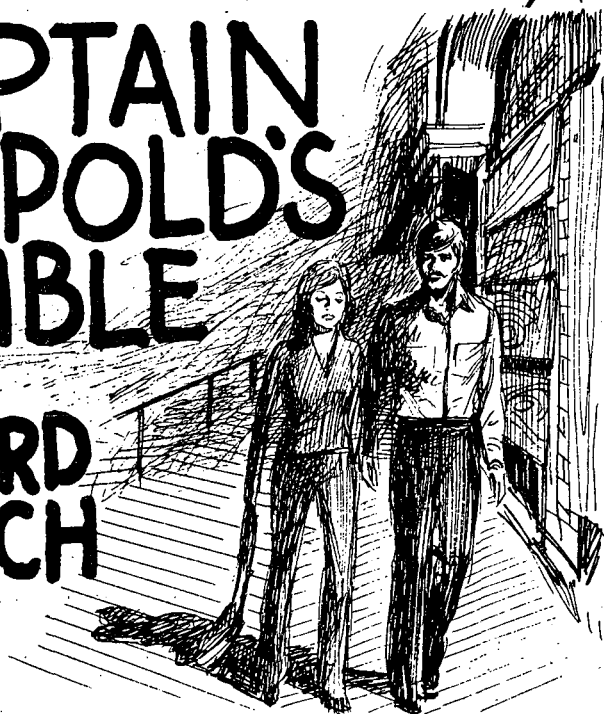
Toler lifted his glass. "Couldn't be better, Mr. Giang. Couldn't be better."



Connie Trent had once arrested Len Wilde for selling cocaine . . .

CAPTAIN LEOPOLD'S GAMBLE

by
**EDWARD
D. HOCH**



Connie Trent, dressed in grey slacks and a bright green sweater, poked her head around the corner of Captain Leopold's office door and said, "I'm going now, Captain."

He smiled and glanced at the overnight bag she was carrying. "Going off for the weekend?"

She nodded. "I'm driving down to Atlantic City with a friend."

"Atlantic City? That's five hours from here." He spoke the words as

her father might have, with a faint but unmistakable tone of disapproval.

"Only four hours if we avoid New York City. We'll go across Westchester to the Tappan Zee Bridge and down the Garden State Parkway."

"I didn't know you were a gambler."

"I'm not," she answered with a laugh. "This fellow I've been dating suggested it, and I'm curious to see the new casinos. I'm taking fifty dollars along, and when that's gone I quit."

"Is he anyone I know?"

"Buddy? No, he's from New York." He was always curious when she dated someone new. Just as her father might have been.

"Well, have a good time," he said, returning to his paperwork. "But be careful."

"Thanks. I will."

She'd brought her overnight bag and a change of clothes so she wouldn't have to stop at the apartment before meeting Buddy. They wanted to reach Atlantic City in time for a late dinner and a little gambling.

She parked her car at a shopping center west of the city and waited until she saw Buddy's tan sports car pull up nearby. "How's my lady detective today?" he asked with a smile.

"Fine." She tossed her overnight bag into the back and climbed in front beside him.

"Will your car be safe here over the weekend?"

"As safe as on the street in front of my apartment."

He pulled onto the highway and headed for the New York State line. Though she'd known Buddy only two months, Connie felt comfortable with him. He was fun to be with, and he took her places she wouldn't ordinarily go. They'd been to New York twice, but this was her first trip to Atlantic City. Buddy had business contacts there.

They turned off onto the Atlantic City Expressway and came into the city on Missouri Avenue. She spotted signs directing them to Ventnor, Atlantic, Pacific, and the other familiar Monopoly-game street names. Buddy drove north to New York Avenue and found a parking lot just a few blocks from the Resorts International Hotel. It was a large building, even without the addition of the new casino, and Connie tried to imagine what it might have been like in another era. The high ceilings and fake palm trees had an aura of the Thirties to her.

After dinner they followed the arrows to the downstairs casino. It was a huge square room that seemed dim and smoky at first glance. Buddy bought her a roll of silver dollars and suggested she play the slot machines until he returned. "I have a little business," he explained.

"These are too much," she said, rejecting the coins. "I brought my own money. The quarter machines are more my speed."

He broke open the dollar roll. "Take ten of them at least. They'll bring you luck."

"Oh, all right," she agreed with a smile.

The casino was crowded to overflowing on a Saturday night, and she lost sight of him as soon as he left. She wandered down the rows of blackjack and roulette tables, but they were too crowded to play. Only when she reached the twenty-five-dollar-minimum tables did she find empty chairs—and that was a bit too rich for her income. Finally she went back to the row of dollar machines where they'd agreed to meet, and started playing the Kennedy silver dollars. On the seventh one she hit the machine for twenty dollars and dumped them in her purse.

"It's your lucky night," a voice said over her shoulder.

She glanced around and saw a young man wearing an open-necked shirt and a dark-blue jacket. His face was vaguely familiar, but at first she didn't place him. "Do I know you?"

"You did about seven years ago, when you were working as an undercover narc."

She gave a quick intake of breath. "Len Wilde, isn't it?"

"That's right. I'm Len Wilde." He was smiling, but there was something hard and dangerous in his eyes. She'd arrested him for selling cocaine to high school kids and he'd drawn a ten-year sentence. That was before she'd joined Leopold's violent-crimes squad. "They let me out early. I only had to serve six years."

"I'm glad you're out," she said, wondering if she meant it. Her mouth felt very dry. A pretty waitress in tights was passing with a tray of drinks and Connie signalled her for one, reaching into her purse for money.

"It's on me," Len Wilde said.

"No, thanks." Connie paid for her own drink and he took one too. She glanced around, hoping Buddy would come back. "I'm with a friend," she said. "We're just down for the day."

"You still a lady cop?"

"Yes."

"Do you still carry that little revolver in your purse?"

She felt her confidence returning. "That's right."

"You sure fooled me back then. Here I was figuring we'd end up in bed together and you busted me."

"It was my job." She sipped her drink and looked around.

"I thought about you a lot in prison. I thought about you almost every night I was there."

"I really have to be going—"

Len Wilde took a step forward. "I think you're afraid of me, Connie. You shouldn't be. We're surrounded by thousands of people. What could I do to you?"

"You'd be smart not to do anything to me, here or elsewhere," she told him. "I don't know the conditions of your parole, but it's possible you're violating it just by being here."

"Do you want to arrest me?" he asked without losing his grin.

Connie turned away from him and walked quickly through the crowd. Up ahead she caught sight of Buddy and hurried to intercept him.

He turned toward her. "There you are! I've been looking for you!"

"Let's get out of here."

"What's the trouble?"

"I met a man I sent to prison. He's annoying me."

"Where is he?"

"Never mind. Let's just go." She downed the rest of her drink and set the glass next to one of the slot machines.

"The Park Place is just a few blocks south. We can walk there along the Boardwalk."

"Anywhere!"

She followed him into the night air. Here, along the wide expanse of boardwalk, the breeze from the ocean was surprisingly cool. "Feel better now?"

She put a hand to her forehead. "I don't know."

"The air will help."

"Did you finish your business?" she asked, trying to make conversation. Why did she suddenly feel so strange?

"Just about. But I have to make a stop up here along the Boardwalk."

"All these places seem closed."

"It's someone who's expecting me."

They passed dingy storefronts selling pizza and T-shirts and cheap oil

paintings, closed now against the night. As they walked, Connie became aware of the weight of her purse, heavier than usual. Then she remembered her winnings. "I won."

"What?" Buddy turned toward her. His face seemed the color of green cheese.

"On the machines," she said. "I won."

"That's fine. Look, I have to turn in here for just a minute. Will you be all right out here alone?"

"Can't I come in with you?"

"No. I won't be long."

They'd paused before a row of shops with a sign over them that read FUTURE SITE OF MARVIN GARDENS HOTEL CASINO. Connie tried to focus on the sign. When she looked around again, Buddy was gone. There was an odd metallic taste in her mouth and she could feel her pulse racing. There was a roaring in her head and she turned toward the ocean. Even in the darkness the waves seemed to be rolling toward her, reaching out to envelop her. "Buddy!" she screamed, and ran inside to find him.

The shop was unoccupied, boarded up, awaiting the wrecker. For a moment she could see nothing. Then the walls began to vibrate into a kaleidoscope of colors. "Buddy!" she cried again. "Where are you?"

Then she saw him.

He was nine feet tall and he held a pistol the size of a cannon in one hand. His face was distorted and rubbery and she wondered if he had grown fangs. It reminded her of a horror movie from her youth and she cringed at the memory, trying to hide behind the seat as she had done twenty years before.

The weapon wavered in the light, and she saw that his other hand held a long brass key. He plunged the key into a hole in the wall and a drawer slid open. There was a package inside, and as he ripped it open she saw it was filled with strips of colored paper. They drifted and danced in the dim light, making her laugh.

There was a noise behind her, and her laughter seemed to tumble and shatter on the floor. Buddy turned to face her. "I told you not to come in," he said, and raised the shimmering pistol.

"You don't want to hurt me, Buddy," she said; remembering she had a gun somewhere. She dropped to her knees on the dusty floor and clawed at her purse, but her hands only found silver dollars.

The gun wavered and then fired, spitting a tongue of flame. She closed

her eyes yet she saw the bullets speeding toward her down a long dark tunnel. The sound echoed behind her as the bullets drew closer. Time and distance seemed to have lost all meaning.

Though she watched it streaking toward her, she was still surprised when the bullet tore into her.

Captain Leopold arrived in Atlantic City late the next afternoon. The previous day's warm April breeze had given way to a chill drizzle that all but emptied the Boardwalk of strollers. Leopold saw the landmarks only in passing as he drove along Pacific Avenue and turned down Tennessee toward the city hall and police headquarters.

The man he'd spoken with on the phone, whom he'd driven four hours to see because it was faster than making plane connections in the uncertain weather, was a city detective named Spiler. When the man came forward from his desk with his hand extended, Leopold was surprised by his youth. Certainly he was still in his early thirties, and darkly handsome with a trim moustache. The voice on the telephone had suggested someone older and wiser.

"I'm Detective Spiler," the man said. "It's nice to meet you."

Leopold accepted his hand. "How is she?" he asked.

Spiler took a deep breath. "Holding her own. They removed the bullet, and that's the important thing."

"Has she spoken yet?"

"Just gibberish."

"Gibberish?"

"The doctors think she was high on something before she was shot—probably LSD. It hasn't completely worn off yet."

"You didn't tell me that on the phone!"

"I thought one shock at a time was enough."

"Can I see her?"

"I don't know. We'll go over to the hospital."

"Exactly what happened?"

"We don't know very much, I'm afraid. We had a report from the Boardwalk of shots being fired. A patrolman found a body on the beach—an ex-convict named Walter Ascot. We're trying to get a dossier on him now."

He opened a folder and showed Leopold a photo of the dead man on the beach. He was fairly young, with a moustache—he looked something

like Spiler, in fact. "He'd been shot twice in the chest and left a trail of blood back across the Boardwalk to an empty tearoom and fortune-telling parlor in a building that's due to be torn down. That's where we found Miss Trent. Her weapon and her identification were still in her purse."

They drove to the hospital on Pacific Avenue. Leopold was silent as they walked down a long corridor to the intensive-care unit. A nurse led them to the bed where Connie lay in a webbing of tubes and monitoring wires, so small and frail that Leopold didn't recognize her at first. She stirred and opened her eyes.

"Connie—"

"She may not recognize you," Spiler warned.

"Connie, it's Captain Leopold. How are you?"

"Buddy shot me," she said quite clearly. "He took a package of paper from a drawer in the wall and then he shot me."

Her eyes closed and she didn't respond again when Leopold spoke her name. He followed Spiler into the hall. "Has she told you anything more than that?"

"Even that was gibberish until now. Do you have any idea who this man Buddy is?"

"She's been going out with him. They came here together. That's all I know."

"Is he from your area?"

"She said he was from New York, I think." He glanced toward the door. "Tell me about her wound."

"The doctors say she was lucky—the bullet entered her back between a couple of ribs. It slanted downward and missed all the vital organs. A bone stopped it and they removed it. The main damage was loss of blood."

"It couldn't have been too large a caliber bullet if it was stopped by a bone," Leopold said.

"That's right—.25-caliber. Probably from the same gun that killed this man Ascot. Ballistics will compare the bullets tomorrow morning, but we're pretty certain."

The nurse came out to them. "She's talking again."

Leopold hurried to Connie's bedside, but her tossing restlessness yielded only a scattering of words. "Wild . . . Buddy . . . Wild . . ."

The young detective turned to Leopold. "Wild? Is that an expression of hers?"

"I've never heard her use it."

They went back outside. Spiler lit a cigarette as they left the building. He studied Leopold through the smoke and said, "You care a great deal about her, don't you?"

"She's been on my squad for nearly seven years. I suppose she's like a daughter to me. Once she was dating a police officer someone killed with a shotgun blast. Some of the pellets hit her in the arm. It was a minor wound, but the thought of how close she'd come to death has stayed with me."

Spiler put a hand on his shoulder. "Feel like getting something to eat?"
"I should stay here."

"No, you shouldn't. The doctors are looking after her."

"All right," Leopold agreed.

They went to a coffee shop at one of the nearby casinos. As they ate, Leopold commented, "I suppose it's a whole different job here since gambling came to Atlantic City."

Spiler sipped his coffee. "It's not exactly what I bargained for when I joined the force ten years ago. But you get used to it. The casinos have their own security forces to deal with gambling cheats, of course. We mostly see the secondary effects, like prostitution and con games."

"Do you get a lot of Vegas hoods?"

"Some." Spiler smiled at the thought. "They aren't very used to things here yet. Last month we grabbed one guy carrying a roll of dimes in his pocket. They fit nicely in the hand when you're slugging someone. He claimed he had them to play the slots. That excuse might have worked in Nevada, but not here. The Atlantic City casinos don't have any dime machines."

"Interesting."

"I went through Miss Trent's purse. That was interesting too. Along with her ID and service revolver and the usual girl things, there were twenty-three Kennedy silver dollars."

"She must have hit the slots," Leopold speculated.

"Probably. And it tells us where she was."

"How?"

"The first casino to open here was Resorts International. At that time the Kennedy dollars were the standard size, and the slot machines at Resorts are built to take them. But in the year before the next two casinos opened, the government began minting the smaller Susan B. Anthony

dollars. So the dollar slots at all the other casinos in town are built for the smaller coins. Those Kennedy dollars in her purse tell us she'd been to Resorts. And also that she hadn't yet been to the other casinos."

"How does it tell you that?"

"Nobody carries around all these silver dollars for fun, especially in a purse already weighted down with a revolver. She took them with her rather than cashing them in because she thought she could use them at the next casino. If she'd been to any of the others she'd have known they weren't used there and she'd have cashed them in."

"It makes sense," Leopold admitted. She'd been to Resorts, won a bit on the machines, and headed down the Boardwalk with Buddy. Then something happened and Buddy shot her and this other man. But what happened? Why did Buddy try to kill her? And where did he go?

"I'm going over to the casinos and take a look around," Spiler decided.

"I'd like to come along," Leopold said. "I know I have no jurisdiction down here, but maybe I can help out."

They first checked the Resorts casino without finding any leads and then moved down the Boardwalk to the Park Place and the Boardwalk Regency. The long rows of slot machines with their ringing bells to signal a winner jangled Leopold's nerves. Looking up, he saw little silver bubbles protruding from the ceiling. "What are those?" he asked Spiler.

"TV monitors to watch the gaming tables. It's an improvement over the one-way mirrors they use in Nevada."

Leopold watched a long-legged cocktail waitress deliver a tray of drinks to one of the blackjack tables. One of the players half turned to accept a drink, then turned quickly away when his eyes met Leopold's. He finished the hand and then gave up his seat at the table.

"Come on," Leopold said. "That one interests me."

"Do you recognize him?"

"No, but he recognized me."

The man was fairly young and well dressed. He moved quickly through the crowd and seemed to be heading for the hotel lobby and the street beyond. Following close behind, something stirred in Leopold's memory.

"Wild. She said Wild, didn't she?"

"I think so. Was it a name?"

"Lew or Len Wilde, with an 'e'. She got him on a narcotics rap years ago—just before she joined my department. Come on, let's stop him."

Wilde turned to glance over his shoulder and then broke into a run, heading across the red-carpeted lobby toward the street. Leopold was after him in a flash, but Spiler was even faster. He launched a flying tackle that caught Wilde around the ankles. They went down together on the thick carpet as bystanders gaped and gasped.

"Police," Spiler announced, holding up his badge as two burly hotel security men came running over. "We want this man for questioning." He helped Wilde to his feet, keeping a firm grip on him.

"What is this?" the young man asked. "I want a lawyer."

"You'll get one," Spiler said. "Let's go talk in the car."

They hustled him out and across the street to the unmarked car. Leopold slid into the back seat behind him.

"Is it Lew or Len?"

"Len."

"Empty out your pockets, Len."

"Go to hell. You don't have a warrant."

"We don't need one if we have reason to believe a crime's been committed."

Len Wilde's eyes narrowed. "What crime?"

"Remember Connie Trent?"

He looked away a bit too quickly. "I remember her."

"Seen her around lately?"

"I'm living down here now. I don't get up your way."

"Have you seen her down here?"

Wilde frowned at him. "Did she say I did?"

"She said more than that," Leopold told him, deciding to take a guess.

"She said you slipped her some LSD."

"What? That's crazy!"

"We'll see what a jury thinks. Now empty your pockets."

Leopold spotted the tablets at once. "Do we need a lab test, Len, or do you admit it's LSD?"

"I'm not admitting anything. Some guy gave them to me."

"You thought that would be poetic justice, didn't you? Slipping acid to the lady cop who nailed you on a narcotics rap. You probably spent all last night laughing."

"I don't know what you're talkin' about. Where's this supposed to have happened?"

Leopold took another chance. "The Resorts casino."

Len Wilde licked his lips and said nothing. For the first time he really looked worried, and Leopold knew he'd guessed right.

"I've got some questions for you too," Spiler said. "What do you know about a man named Walter Ascot?"

"Never heard of him."

"He was murdered down on the Boardwalk last night. We found his body on the beach."

"Why should I know him?"

Leopold answered that one. "Because he was an ex-con and you're an ex-con. Maybe we'll find out you were cellmates."

"I never heard of him," Wilde insisted.

"What about Buddy?"

"Buddy who?"

"That's what we're asking you. The guy Connie Trent was with at the casino last night."

"She was alone when I saw her."

"Then you admit seeing her!"

Wilde clamped his mouth shut and only opened it long enough to say, "I want a lawyer."

An hour later, after Len Wilde had been booked on a holding charge at police headquarters, Leopold and Spiler were out again, this time headed for the deserted store where Connie had been shot.

"Unless she comes out of it enough to give us a more definite statement about Wilde, we may have to let him go," Spiler said. "Those tabs probably are LSD or some other hallucinogen, but a good lawyer would cut us to ribbons on our arrest-and-search procedure."

Leopold glumly admitted he was probably right. His fury over what had happened to Connie hadn't allowed him to think straight. "All I know is every minute we waste, this Buddy could be getting further away."

The weather was still chilly and only a few people were on the Boardwalk. Some stood in a cluster, staring down at the beach, obviously discussing the body that had been found there the previous night. "Here we are," Spiler said, indicating a storefront with a sign over the door announcing its imminent demolition. "This whole block is being torn down for a new casino."

He unlocked the door and they stepped inside. Spiler was immediately on guard. He motioned Leopold to silence and moved quickly across the

darkened room. There was a screech of terror as he yanked open a closet door and pulled a struggling woman out.

"The power's still on here," he said to Leopold. "Hit the light switch next to the door."

The lights came on and Leopold saw him holding a woman in a long multicolored dress. "Let me introduce you. Captain Leopold, this is Shirley Talon, better known on the Boardwalk as Gypsy Joy. This used to be her shop. She served refreshments and read tea leaves here."

"It's still my shop! Let go of me, you—"

Leopold guessed her age to be anywhere from twenty-five to forty. She was pretty in spite of the hardness of her features. "How'd you get in here, Shirley?" he asked.

"I had a key. It's still my shop!"

"It was condemned by the city. You know that. Besides, since last night it's a crime scene. Didn't you see the notice outside?"

"Don't hassle *me*. I came in through the back."

"Looking for something the police might have missed?" Leopold suggested.

She glared at him and then asked Spiler, "Is he one of yours?"

"He's visiting from Connecticut. But if he has any questions, you answer them."

"I just try to earn an honest buck. First you take away my business and then you try to hassle me."

"Were you around last night, Shirley?"

"I didn't see nothing!"

"We're talking about a murder—maybe two murders," Leopold said gruffly. "If you want to stay out of jail, you'll cooperate with us."

After a pouting silence she said, "What do you want to know?"

"Did you see anything last night? I know you hang around here, especially on weekends."

"Of course I hang around here! You closed my place! People come from out of town looking for me. If I see them I take them up to my apartment for a reading."

Spiler eyed her suspiciously. "Be careful what you do, Shirley. You might get a soliciting charge."

"I'm no prostitute! I tell fortunes!"

"I'm just telling you to be careful. There are lots of girls coming into the city from New York and the West Coast. We're cracking down."

"Tell us about last night," Leopold urged.

Shirley smiled at him, revealing a gold tooth in the best gypsy tradition. "He's nice, Spiler. You should have more like him."

"Just tell us what you saw."

"It must have been close to midnight. I was getting ready to call it a night when I seen these two walking south on the Boardwalk—a fellow and girl. Only she was starting to weave a little. I think she was drunk or high on something."

"Did you recognize them?"

"Never saw them before. They aren't local, unless they just moved here. I figured them for tourists, down for the weekend, except that he seemed to be looking for something. Finally he stopped right in front of this place. He told her to wait and he came inside."

"With a key?"

"Yeah, with a key. That's when I noticed somebody was following them."

"Who was it?"

"A man. I couldn't see him very well, but he or something else frightened the girl and she ran inside. A couple of minutes later I heard the shots."

Spiler nodded. "The man following them was Ascot. Buddy panicked and shot them both."

"But what was Buddy after?" Leopold wanted to know. Remembering Connie's words about Buddy taking a package of paper from a drawer, he went over to examine the wall. It took him only a moment to find the hidden drawer, its front covered over with wallpaper to match the rest of the garish wall. But, whatever it had held, the drawer was empty now. "Did anyone ever leave things with you?" he asked Shirley. "Packages for safekeeping?"

"Do you think I run a checkroom? I read tea leaves, that's all."

Spiler moved toward the door. "We may want to talk with you again, Shirley. Stay around town."

"I'm not going nowhere."

He opened the door and allowed her to leave, then turned back to Leopold.

"She's lying. She knows what they were after in here and she sneaked in to see if they got it."

"Connie said it was a package of paper."

"She was too high to know for sure. It could have been almost anything."

"Do you think Shirley knows where Buddy is?" Leopold asked.

"She may. I'll have her watched."

"Let's go back to the hospital."

When they left the building there were still people out on the sand, looking at the place where a man had died.

On the way to the hospital Spiler stopped by his office. The dossier on the dead man had finally arrived, and he skimmed over it, reading the relevant parts to Leopold. "Walter Ascot, born in New York City thirty-four years ago. A few juvenile arrests and two years in the slammer for attempted armed robbery. He was paroled five years ago. He stayed clean for a while, but then two years ago bank cameras photographed a man answering his description robbing the Central Jersey Savings Bank. Ascot dropped from sight after the robbery. As you can see from this photograph, he grew a moustache and changed his hair color. There was another man, unidentified, in on the robbery, and the forty-thousand-dollars they got away with was never recovered."

"You think Buddy was his partner in the robbery?"

"It looks like it," Spiler admitted. "The money was hidden at Gypsy Joy's place on the Boardwalk, but the building was due for demolition and they had to move it."

"But where does Connie fit in?" Leopold wondered. "Why would Buddy take a policewoman along on something like this?"

"You've got me there, pal," Spiler said.

When they reached the hospital the news was good. The effects of the drug had worn off and Connie was more lucid. Her responses were still slow because of the medication given her during surgery, but for the first time the doctors were predicting a full recovery.

Spiler bent over the bed. "Miss Trent, can you hear me?"

She opened her eyes. "Buddy?"

"No, it's not Buddy, Miss Trent. It's Detective Spiler of the Atlantic City Police. Captain Leopold is here with me."

Leopold moved into her range of vision. "How are you feeling, Connie?"

"Groggy. I can't think straight."

"You're coming along fine. Can you remember what happened to you?"

"I—Buddy shot me. In that dark place on the Boardwalk. The bullet—"
"The bullet's out," he assured her. "Tell me, Connie, what's Buddy's name?"

"Nick Tosca. But he said everyone called him Buddy."

"Where did you meet him?"

"At a restaurant in White Plains. A couple of months ago."

"Did you have any reason to believe he might be a criminal?"

She closed her eyes. "I don't know. There was something strange about him, but he was nice to me. He never talked about my work. He didn't seem to care that I was a police officer. That was a treat."

"He cared," Leopold told her. "He got you involved in a very complex scheme. Can you tell me exactly what happened last night?"

"Last night? Was it last night?" She took a deep breath, then grimaced in pain.

Leopold rested a hand on her arm. "Take it easy. You had a bad wound."

She sighed. "Buddy went off to take care of some business and I was playing the dollar machines with some coins he'd given me."

"At Resorts International?"

"Yes. Len Wilde came up to me. He was a man I arrested on a cocaine charge when I was—"

"I know. We have Wilde in custody. Go on."

She tried to smile at the news. "I think he slipped something into my drink. I went outside with Buddy but pretty soon everything started seeming unreal. Buddy left me on the Boardwalk and went into a building."

"Did you see anyone following you?"

"I don't know, but something scared me and I ran inside. Buddy was opening a hidden drawer in the wall and taking out a package. All it contained was scraps of paper. Then he pointed a gun at me and shot me."

"Did Buddy have friends in Atlantic City?"

"I didn't know of any, but he had business of some sort here." She shut her eyes.

"That's all for now, Connie," Leopold told her. "Try to get some rest."

Spiler led the way down the corridor to the elevator. Leopold had a thought. "What did you find in Walter Ascot's pockets?"

"No weapon, if that's what you mean. A wallet, a little money, casino chips, keys."

"Let's go back to headquarters and get those keys."

Spiler smiled as they entered the elevator and he pushed the down button. "Yes, one of the keys in his pocket fits the door of Gypsy Joy's tearoom—if that's what you're wondering."

"That's what I was wondering. And it's all the confirmation I need."

"Confirmation of what? And why didn't you ask Miss Trent for a description of Buddy?"

"I didn't need one," Leopold replied. "When you bent over the bed she called you Buddy. You never did tell me your first name."

"Are you nuts? Do you think I'm—"

The elevator reached street level. "No," Leopold said. "Of course not."

Spiler's face relaxed into a grin. "You believe in suspecting everyone, don't you? My first name is Geoffrey and nobody ever called me Buddy in my life." They walked across the hospital lobby to the street. "Now if you'll tell me where to start looking for Buddy—"

"There are at least five clues to Buddy's present location."

"You mean you know where he is?"

"Yes," Leopold said. "But Buddy didn't shoot Connie, in spite of what she thinks."

"Then who in hell did?"

"I suspect it was Len Wilde, who's resting in one of your cells at this very moment. *Buddy* couldn't have been the killer because Buddy was the victim. He's the one you found out on the beach last night."

While they waited for Len Wilde to be brought down to the interrogation room, Leopold ticked off the clues on his fingers. "The first was the wound itself. When a wounded police officer is telling us who shot her, our first inclination is to believe what she says. But Connie told us Buddy was standing in front of her with a gun. She closed her eyes and he shot her—yet the entry wound was in Connie's back. Isn't it far more likely that Buddy fired at someone who'd entered behind Connie—especially since we know they were being followed? It was the follower who shot Connie."

"I should have caught that," Spiler agreed glumly.

"So the follower shot Connie and then, apparently, he and Buddy exchanged shots. Which of them died? Clue number two—Connie called

you Buddy when you leaned over her bed. Think about it. Walter Ascot looks something like you. I noticed the resemblance when you showed me the photo earlier. So Ascot could have been Buddy. Confirmation comes with clues three, four, and five. Connie said Buddy's name was Nick Tosca, and Tosca is a simple anagram for Ascot, the dead man's real name. Connie told me Buddy was from New York, and we know the dead man was from New York. Finally, the dead man had a key to that shop—something we know Buddy had in his possession, because he had to unlock the door.

"The conclusion is unavoidable—the man who followed them not only shot Connie in the back but also killed Buddy—Ascot."

"I'll buy *all* that," Spiler agreed. "But how do you know the second man was Len Wilde?"

"Ascot-Tosca-Buddy had a partner in the Central Jersey Bank robbery. Despite her denial, it's likely Shirley was hiding the loot from that robbery in her shop. Buddy had to pick it up before the building got torn down. He arranged to meet Connie two months ago, and he brought her along for some purpose. Unless you're a believer in farfetched coincidences, isn't it likely that Len Wilde suggested Connie to Buddy as part of his plan for revenge?"

"You're speculating now."

"But it's a likely speculation. Buddy gave her dollar coins to play the machines so Wilde would know where to find her in the casino. And Buddy wasn't afraid to pick up the money with Connie along, because he knew she'd be on LSD.

"It all fits together. Wilde was Buddy's partner in the bank robbery and this whole plot was aimed at setting Connie up for something. But it fell apart, and Wilde shot them both."

"What was the setup? Why couldn't they just get the money on their own? If they needed a woman along for some reason, why pick a police-woman?"

"I don't know," Leopold admitted. "But I'm hoping that Wilde will tell us."

Wilde came in, looking sleepy-eyed and nervous. Leopold could see that Spiler had a long night of interrogation ahead, and he was right. It wasn't until early morning, after Wilde had heard he'd be charged with one count of first-degree murder, one count of attempted murder, and

other charges relating to the bank robbery and the drugging of Connie Trent, that he decided to talk.

"It was Ascot's idea from the beginning," he argued, nervously puffing on a cigarette. "He got me into the bank robbery. He wanted to hide the money at the tearoom in case the bank had a list of the serial numbers. He said we had to wait a couple of years. A couple of years! Then Gypsy Joy says the building's gonna be torn down and he's got to pick up the package. Not only that—she says she knows about the money and she wants half of it or she'll tell the cops. Hell, we weren't about to give her half!"

"So you decided to kill her."

"Yeah. Like I said, it was Ascot's idea. He figured we could get somebody down here from out of town, drug them, and make it look like they killed Gypsy Joy. That's when I remembered the lady cop who sent me away. I wanted to even the score with her. And it was perfect—she'd be carrying a gun in her purse even when she was off duty so it would be easy to frame her for the shooting. Off-duty policewoman slays fortune-teller while high on drugs—the headline was all written.

"Ascot became Buddy and managed to meet her. He romanced her for a couple of months and then suggested the Atlantic City trip. At the casino, he left her alone so I could drug her drink. He insisted I had to do that part."

"What went wrong at the tearoom?"

"Gypsy Joy wasn't there to meet us. Ascot opened the bundle and it was full of paper. I walked in just then and he took a shot at me. The damn fool thought I'd double-crossed him! I didn't wait to argue. I fired three shots. One hit Connie and the other two got Ascot. I took his gun and the bundle and beat it."

"You say Connie's shooting was an accident?"

"Sure. And the other was self-defense. You're not gettin' me for no Murder One."

"That's for a jury to decide," Spiler told him. "Go call your lawyer. I want him here when you sign this statement."

When he was alone with Spiler, Leopold said, "That's why Buddy got Connie to leave on the trip right from work—to make extra sure she'd have her service revolver with her. What do you think happened to the money?"

"Shirley took it—what else?" Spiler spoke with certainty. "She came back in last night to see if her bundle of paper was still around. You don't think she'd leave the dough there with the building due to be ripped down? Maybe she even hoped they'd kill each other. That's why she stayed away from the meeting." He got up and stretched. "I guess I'll go have a talk with her. What about you?"

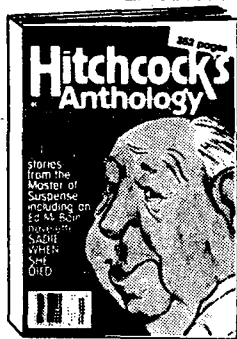
"I want to see Connie again," Leopold said. "Then I'll be heading home. Atlantic City's too rough for me."



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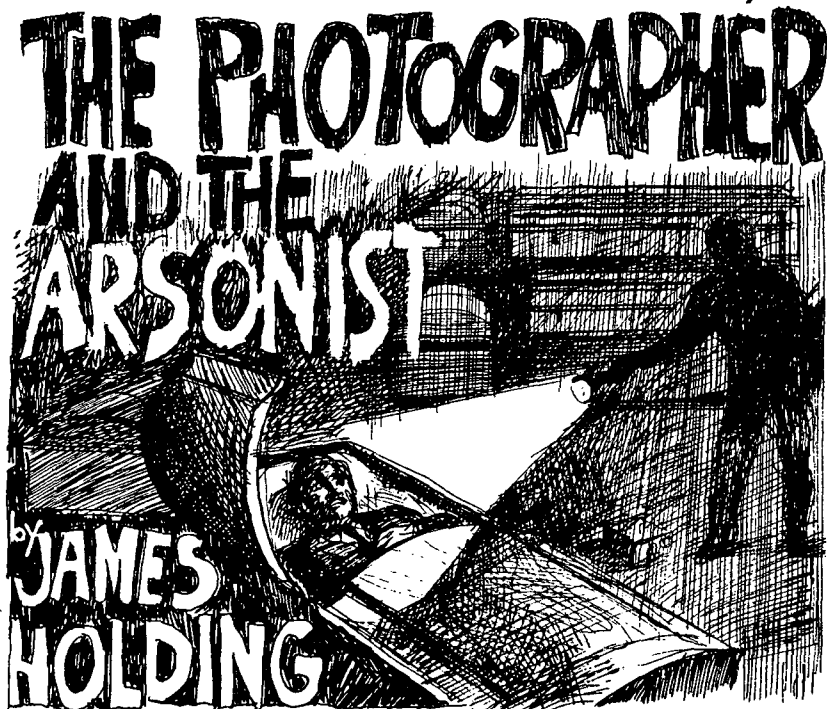
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*The Photographer's assignment led him to the Correa
Mortuary . . .*



The Photographer swam slowly and falteringly back to consciousness through a viscous sea of confusion and pain. And his first thought, as he emerged from darkness, was that he was lying in a coffin.

The thought sent a stab of pure fear through him that helped to hasten the return of his laggard senses. He became aware that his childhood claustrophobia, usually so sternly controlled, had suddenly arrived at the panic stage, catching his breath and making him break out in a cold sweat.

He felt a cushioned softness under his reclining body, the smoothness of velvet against his cheek, when he moved his painfully aching head. A coffin? It certainly felt like one. But no—always an unemotional realist, Manuel Andradas firmly rejected that nightmare fancy.

Until he opened his eyes and saw it was true.

Yet he was not dead, it seemed—unless the devils in hell used flashlights to find their way through the Stygian gloom. For when he raised his head slightly from the velvet cushion and peered over his coffin's edge a narrow flashlight beam directed by an unseen hand was exploring the dark room in which his casket lay.

Manuel watched the light beam as it probed the shadows. And what it revealed brought The Photographer's memory flashing back, fully functioning, from its recent oblivion. He recalled instantly, in full detail, the assignment he had received from Rodolfo yesterday when they met in the obscure café on Rua do Ouvidor.

Rodolfo had greeted The Photographer with the oily smile that so subtly combined contempt with deference. "Are you engaged tonight?" he asked abruptly.

Manuel said, "That is my business, Rodolfo. Until you tell me yours."

"I have an assignment for you from The Big Ones that must be—ah—consummated tonight."

"In that case, I am not otherwise engaged. If you guarantee me an adequate fee."

"I have no doubt that even you will find The Corporation generous in this instance." Rodolfo sipped daintily at his *cafezinho*.

"How much?"

"A million."

Despite himself, The Photographer emitted a grunt of satisfaction. "Very generous," he conceded. "It must be an important personage."

Rodolfo shrugged. "We do not know."

"*Perdao?* You don't know? Then how am I to find him and nullify him?"

"Kindly allow me time to explain." Rodolfo deliberately took another leisurely sip of his coffee. "Our client was unwilling to reveal a name or address for your—ah—million-cruzeiro target. But he *did* give us a means of identification and a place where you can find him."

"*Va bem,*" said Manuel. "Very good." He waited patiently while Rodolfo tore a corner from the café's menu, scrawled a few words in pencil,

and passed it across the table. In silence he read what Rodolfo had written.

Bald, middle-aged man, two meters tall, left arm missing at shoulder. Walks pronounced limp. Rear door, Correa Mortuary, 1251 Pailla, sometime tonight.

The Photographer fixed the words in his mind, then slowly tore the paper into bits and deposited them carefully in his jacket pocket. "This man seems already half dead," he said with unusual levity. "Perhaps you should have offered me only half price to finish the job."

Rodolfo, looking across the table into Manuel's muddy eyes, murmured, "Perhaps I did." His long lips lifted. "In any event, we shall want proof, as usual, to show our client."

Manuel stood up. "This is not my first assignment, Rodolfo. You need not instruct me. Half in advance?"

"Yes." Rodolfo rose too, dropped a few cruzeiros on the table, and accompanied The Photographer to the door of the café.

On the sidewalk outside, Manuel said, "Where do I report?"

"A Cascatinha. Tomorrow noon."

They shook hands. Under cover of the gesture, Rodolfo left a pad of banknotes in Manuel's hand. When they parted, Manuel walked toward Avenida Rio Branca to find an outdoor stand that sold cashew juice. He much preferred it to coffee when he was on an assignment.

The flashlight beam, moving slowly about the dark room, revealed that the coffin in which Manuel lay was surrounded by scores of others.

Of course, he thought, I am in the Correa Mortuary. This was followed swiftly and with deep shame by the realization that Manuel Andradas had allowed himself, apparently, to be humiliated by a one-armed cripple.

The dancing light came to rest as the flashlight was apparently set down on top of a casket. Its beam pointed toward the end of the room, illuminating a trio of coffins standing on end below a heavily draped window. As Manuel watched, a long muscular arm appeared in the light beam. The hand at the end of the arm held a spouted container, the contents of which it began to pour over the three caskets and the lower edges of the heavy draperies above them.

The stink of kerosene suddenly assailed Manuel's nostrils, inducing in him an overpowering desire to sneeze. He struggled unsuccessfully to

contain it, but inexorably the explosion of breath was forced from him. Instantly the hand holding the spouted container dropped it to the ground and a split second later the flashlight's beam held Manuel's casket in its glow.

The Photographer lifted himself on his elbows and said in a conversational tone, "So you are an arsonist, is that it?"

The flashlight approached, the beam half blinding Manuel. "Yes," said a voice from the darkness behind it. "I am a torch. In several senses of the word."

The voice shocked Manuel. It was hoarse, guttural, nothing more than a half whisper—the voice of someone who has suffered a partial laryngectomy. So, thought Manuel bitterly, you have been bested not only by a limping middle-aged one-armed man but by a man probably dying of a malignancy of the voice box as well! He kept the disgust from his voice, however, when he said, "*Por favor*, what made you aware of my presence here tonight, Senhor?"

Again the croaking whisper: "There is nothing wrong with my ears, thank God. As I put my key in the door, I heard a rattling in the leaves of the tree above me. And there was not a breath of wind."

"I was trying to get a look at you," Manuel said. "And you waited inside the door until I attempted to follow you in?"

"I was behind the door when your questing head appeared around it. A perfect target."

"My head, yes. And you successfully struck it. With what, may I ask?"

"My can of kerosene. It's quite heavy when full." A croak of merriment. "A blunt instrument, I believe it is called."

"With only one arm," Manuel began, "how could you possibly lift me into this—"

The voice interrupted. "How did you know I have only one arm?"

Manuel temporized. "I saw from my perch in the tree that you had to put down the kerosene can while you opened the door with your key. What have you done with my camera case?" The Photographer valued only one thing above his profession and its accouterments—money. "The equipment in my camera case is very valuable."

"Including, I suppose, the garrote, the pistol, and the vial of black stuff that I think must be curare?" The unseen arsonist again gave vent to his weird chuckle. "No harm has come to your equipment. If it's any comfort to you, it will burn with you. A form of suttee, eh?" He paused. "But

before I light a match and end this matter, will you satisfy my curiosity about who you are?"

Manuel tensed. "If you will let me die like a man and not lying supine in my own coffin." Without waiting for permission, he sat up in his casket and swung his legs over the edge of it. "If I must burn, I prefer, actually, to be dead before the flames reach me."

"Well, that can be easily arranged." The flashlight rattled as it was set down and, almost at once, Manuel's own pistol, held in the arsonist's single steady hand, appeared in the flashlight spill pointing unwaveringly at The Photographer's face. "Put your hands behind your neck and stay exactly as you are," the voice said calmly. "Now, then. Answer my question. Why were you hiding in that tree? You are no common thief attempting to rob a deserted mortuary. Not when you carry as burglar tools three cameras, a garrote, a vial of poison, and this pistol now regarding you."

"You're right, I'm no common thief," said Manuel. With his hands behind his neck and his legs hanging over the edge of the casket, his position was extremely awkward. Awkward? he thought sourly; helpless was a better word. Aloud he said, "I'll tell you the truth, Senhor. I was lying in wait to kill you."

The self-styled torch drew in a ragged breath. "To kill me? Why?"

"I was paid to do it."

"By whom?"

"The Corporation. The Big Ones. You know of them?"

"I know of them. But they have nothing to do with me."

"They hired me to murder you on behalf of a client of theirs."

"A client?" The hand holding the pistol jerked a little, as though in surprise. "Do you know who this client is?"

"I am never told who pays The Corporation for my services. I'm sorry."

"Were you told that I am a torch?"

"No."

"Were you given my name?"

"No."

"But you were given a description of me, and you were told you could find me here tonight at this mortuary? Entering with a key by the back door?"

"Yes."

There was a long moment of silence. At length the hoarse whisper

came from the darkness. "It becomes quite clear, then, who the client of The Big Ones is. No one else would withhold my name and profession yet know exactly where I could be found on this specific night."

"And who is this client?" Manuel asked curiously.

The whisperer uttered a curse. "My employers—who else? The men who hire me to set the fires that have made them rich."

Manuel said sententiously, "I'm not surprised. The employer exploits the laborer and then, when his usefulness ends, discards him. It's the way of the world."

"Tonight was to be my last assignment." The whisper was bitter. "I was to leave for Buenos Aires tomorrow at dawn."

Manuel murmured, "This is *my* last assignment also, it seems."

The whisperer ignored him. "Why in the name of God do they want me dead? I have served them faithfully and well."

"It's simple," said Manuel. "While you remain alive you're a witness against them. You hold their futures in your hand." He cleared his throat. "Are there many of them?"

"A lawyer, some property owners, some appraisers, some fire inspectors." The unseen man became more and more incensed. "I have made millions for them! Millions! Without a breath of suspicion ever touching them! And now they want to murder me!"

"May I make a small correction?" said Manuel. "I am the one who will now be murdered, is it not so?"

"It's my only hope, Senhor. The dogs will find that Diogo Almeida will not allow himself to be butchered so easily! I shall set fire to this mortuary, you will perish in it, and tomorrow the conspirators will believe the charred corpse found in the ashes is mine. Meanwhile, I shall catch my dawn flight to Buenos Aires."

"I have two arms," Manuel pointed out. "Your charred corpse would have only one."

"True," Almeida conceded. "But that too can be easily taken care of."

Manuel suppressed a shudder. "Allow me a suggestion, Senhor Almeida. In return for my life, I could permit you to escape safely to Argentina after you have set this fire. I could report to The Big Ones that I failed to carry out my mission to nullify you."

"Do you think me a fool? If *you* don't kill me, Senhor Santiago will simply hire somebody else to do the job for him—either here or in Argentina, it makes no difference. He has wide influence."

"Santiago?" said Manuel. "I know of him. A prominent attorney. Is he the one?"

"Yes. Sebastien Santiago. He gives me my assignments. He is the manager of the conspiracy."

"To defraud insurance firms?"

"Of course." There was impatience in Diogo Almeida's reply. "What other motive?"

Manuel interrupted him. "And the property owners—like the owners of this mortuary—are in on the arson plot?"

"Their connivance is essential, don't you understand? Santiago persuades the property owners to cooperate. Rio Appraisers and Consolidated Evaluation supply false appraisals. The owners over-insure by two or three hundred percent. When I burn the properties, the fire marshals falsify their reports. Then, after the insurance settlements, the profits are split four ways."

"Five ways, surely," said Manuel softly. "You must get something for your efforts?"

Almeida sneered, "Two lousy percent! And I take all the risks! But never again! Tonight finishes it!"

Manuel said, "Before you nullify me, Senhor Almeida, I must tell you, as one professional to another, that in a way I admire your work. You said that your efforts have meant millions to your employers. Millions! You must have set some very important fires!"

A certain complacency entered Almeida's tone. "I have indeed. The most important, biggest fires of the past three years." Then, like water bursting from an overturned barrel, the names gushed compulsively from the crippled larynx of Diogo Almeida: the names of a plush nightclub, two large warehouses, a department store, an office block, even a new hotel that had burned to the ground on the eve of its grand opening.

"And now the Correa Mortuary," finished Manuel, his mind working swiftly. Almeida was two meters tall. The pistol presumably was held at waist level, so his captor's throat should be approximately half a meter above the pistol and slightly to the right of the flashlight beam.

Almeida was saying, "Yes, and now the Correa Mortuary, as you say, Senhor." Then, with grim humor, "As one professional to another, I am very sorry I must kill you now. But I assure you it is quite necessary."

Manuel said quickly, "Let me lower my arms so that I die with a little dignity."

"As you wish," said Almeida. His finger tightened on the trigger of the pistol.

"Thanks," said Manuel.

In one swift blur of motion he lowered his right arm and hurled the small leaf-shaped knife, drawn quietly some moments before from the sheath between his shoulder blades, straight at the point where he had estimated Almeida's throat to be.

His estimate proved accurate. There was a gasp, the pistol dropped to the floor, and, in a moment, the arsonist collapsed through the beam of light which continued to shine undisturbed on the top of the nearby coffin.

The next day at noon, at the small outdoor café called A Cascatinha in the Forest of Tijuca, Manuel handed a Polaroid photograph to Rodolfo.

It showed quite clearly Diogo Almeida lying between two coffins, indubitably dead from a dreadful wound in his throat. Manuel had snapped the picture just before tossing a lighted match into Almeida's kerosene.

"Satisfactory?" he asked Rodolfo.

Rodolfo nodded. "I should think so."

"If not, tell your client to read the reports of the Correa Mortuary fire in this morning's newspapers. They mention, if I am not mistaken, the charred body of a one-armed man found in the casket-storage room."

"We have already read the papers," said Rodolfo. "Here is the balance of your money."

He passed it to Manuel under the table. Manuel dropped the bundle of notes casually into the camera case between his feet.

A month later, The Photographer presented himself at the offices of Senhor Sebastien Santiago, attorney at law.

For the occasion, Manuel wore a false moustache, long mutton-chop sideburns that were equally spurious, and dark sunglasses so large they concealed most of his upper face. Small wads of cotton inserted along the jawline in his right cheek imparted an odd downward droop to one corner of his mouth and made his smile lopsided. Instead of his precious camera case he carried a small attaché case. He had made an appointment by telephone several days before.

The lawyer's reception room was light, airy, and spacious; there was an unmistakable air of prosperity about it—from the beautiful Chinese

rug on the floor to the stylishly coiffed receptionist at her desk outside the lawyer's office door.

Manuel said to the receptionist, "I am Senhor Joao Pereira. I have an appointment with Senhor Santiago."

She consulted her appointment pad and nodded. "How nice of you," she bubbled; "to arrive exactly on time." She paused. "When you made this appointment, Senhor Pereira, you said you wished to discuss with Senhor Santiago the estate of one of his clients."

"That is so."

"Perhaps you will tell me the name of this client: I can have the proper file ready for Senhor Santiago when you talk with him."

"I am quite certain no file will be necessary, Senhora. May I see the Senhor now?"

"Certainly." She rose and he followed her the few steps to the inner door. She rapped lightly upon it, opened it, stuck her head inside, and announced, "Senhor Pereira to see you." She stepped back to allow Manuel to enter and he heard the door close behind him.

Sebastien Santiago crouched behind a huge desk like a frog upon a lily pad. He somewhat resembled a frog too, Manuel thought, with his dumpy figure, large head, wide mouth, and substantial double chin. He stood to greet Manuel, then waved him to a chair. "So," he said, reseating himself. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Senhor Pereira. My secretary has told me you wish to consult me about the estate of one of my clients."

Unhurriedly, Manuel put his briefcase on the floor beside his chair. "Perhaps I should have said an employee of yours," he said, "rather than a client."

"An employee? You surprise me, Senhor Pereira. May I ask to which employee of mine you refer?"

"A tall, one-armed man named Diogo Almeida."

Santiago raised his eyebrows. "Almeida? You must be mistaken. I have no employee of that name. Nor have I ever had one."

"I was given to understand differently, Senhor Santiago. I'm sorry to have to disagree with you, but my source cannot be questioned."

"Your source? What source?"

"Senhor Almeida himself."

Santiago smiled indulgently. "I fear you have been made the victim of a deception. Or of a practical joke. I have never employed anyone

named Almeida. So it seems we have nothing to discuss. I regret that you have wasted your time. And mine." Santiago began to rise.

Manuel held up a hand. "I beg you," he said, "to hear me out. Almeida told me you employed him to do odd jobs for you. He convinced me he was telling the truth."

Santiago resumed his seat. "The more fool you, then, if you will forgive my candor. May I ask what these so-called odd jobs were?"

"Quite simply," said Manuel, "to set fire to a number of establishments in the city which you wished burned to the ground."

Santiago laughed. "If he told you that, he is mad, this—what was his name? Almeida?—and you, Senhor, are even madder to believe him. I wonder how you dare come to me, an attorney, with such irresponsible accusations. You must realize I can have you in court on charges of defamation, libel, and God knows what else if you even breathe these allegations publicly."

Manuel said, "I appreciate fully that this is a delicate matter worthy of the most careful handling. Yet I couldn't do other than come to you if I wished to recover my money."

"Your money?"

"Yes. I loaned Senhor Almeida a sum of money, quite a substantial sum, on the strength of his statement about you. He needed the money for something very urgent, as I recall it—to appease an angry mistress or finance an emergency operation on his wife or something of the sort. However, he couldn't at first offer me adequate security for the loan."

"What are you, in God's name?" cried Santiago. "You talk like a money-lender!"

"I am not ashamed of it," said Manuel stiffly. "It is a respectable profession. You must understand, however, that I cannot lend large sums of money indiscriminately—not without excellent security. So I refused Senhor Almeida's application for a loan until he satisfied me I would be repaid."

"By me, presumably," sneered Santiago, "his mythical employer?"

"Exactly. But only if something untoward happened to *him*, you see—such as his untimely death in the Correa Mortuary fire last month."

Some of the color left Santiago's ruddy face.

"Then I was to come see you," Manuel went on. "Otherwise he could have paid his debt to me quite easily out of the two-percent profit you allowed him on each of your—ah—successful enterprises."

Sebastien Santiago said contemptuously, "I see I must be plain with you, Senhor Pereira. I believe you to be a deranged rascal engaged here in a pitiable attempt at blackmail and extortion. I demand that you leave my office this instant or I shall call the police."

"The telephone is at your elbow, sir. However, why not grant me another minute or two to make my case?"

"Not another moment! I have better things to do than listen to a madman making lunatic accusations against me, which are entirely unsupported by anything more than your word. The hypothetical statement of a dead man who is now incapable of testifying, made to a seedy money-lender like you, is hardly admissible as evidence."

Manuel said, "If you have no consideration for yourself, have you none for the colleagues who conspired with you?"

"Colleagues?"

"Yes. In case you should prove recalcitrant, Senhor Santiago, Diogo Almeida suggested that I contact your colleagues on this matter. Namely, two appraisal firms, several fire inspectors, and half a dozen—victims, shall we say?—of your pyrotechnic activities."

"Who," inquired Santiago, "would believe such a wild tale as that?"

"I can think of three excellent possibilities," said Manuel. "One, the insurance companies you defrauded. Two, the police. And, three, the local newspapers."

For the first time Santiago's voice revealed a trace of nervousness. "What makes you think *they* would believe this folderol?"

"I haven't been quite fair with you," admitted Manuel easily, "and I apologize for it. The fact is, I *do* have concrete proof of my statement—proof I had hoped would not be necessary to convince you of my *bona fides*."

"You can't have proof of such outrageous nonsense! What proof could there possibly be?"

Manuel smiled his false lopsided smile. "You might call it a voice from the dead," he said. "I have it here." He took his briefcase into his lap, snapped it open, and withdrew from it a compact tape recorder. "This, no doubt," he said equably, "would also be inadmissible as evidence, Senhor Santiago. Nevertheless, it would certainly give the defrauded insurance companies, the police, and the newspapers an excellent start toward accumulating some, don't you agree?"

"Let me hear it." Santiago sat back in his chair, more like a crouching frog than ever.

Manuel set the recorder on Santiago's desk, turned the playback volume to low, and activated the machine. Suddenly, eerily, the hoarse, croaking half whisper of Diogo Almeida was heard in the room. It had taken thirty-two attempts before Manuel had been able to ape that voice to his satisfaction on tape—thirty-two attempts before he got the cadence, volume, and intonation of Almeida's crippled larynx exactly right. The timbre had been no problem—all hoarse whispers sound much alike.

Judging by Santiago's stricken expression, The Photographer's imitation of Almeida's voice was an unqualified success. The remaining color fled from the lawyer's face as the voice issued from the tape recorder.

"My name is Diogo Almeida. I am making this statement voluntarily to be held as security against a loan being made me by a money-lender named Joao Pereira. This is my statement. For the past three years I have been employed by a prominent attorney of Rio de Janeiro, Senhor Sebastien Santiago, to serve as the torch in an arson ring he operates in the city. Santiago has had the connivance and cooperation, in his conspiracy to defraud insurance companies, of several appraisers, property owners, and city fire marshals, whose names are—"

The names of two firms of appraisers, six property owners, and three fire marshals were all enunciated clearly in the croaking whisper, then: "I request that this statement be held in strictest confidence by Joao Pereira, unless some unforeseen exigency should prevent me from repaying my just debt to him personally. In which case, I am sure that the firms and individuals listed above will cooperate to insure that Joao Pereira is repaid the money I owe him."

"Well?" said Manuel, switching off the recorder.

"I suppose you have had that tape duplicated?"

"Of course. Security again, you see."

All at once, Santiago sounded weary. "So you can continue to blackmail us indefinitely."

Manuel said, "You do me a grave injustice. I am a responsible money-lender, not a blackmailer. I am interested only in getting my money back with appropriate interest. However, be that as it may, you have no choice; do you?"

The steam had gone out of Santiago. "How much money did Almeida borrow from you?"

"Ah!" Manuel expelled a breath of relief. "Now you are being sensible. I lent Diogo Almeida half a million cruzeiros."

"Half a million!" The lawyer was shocked. "What in God's name could he have needed half a million cruzeiros for?"

Manuel shrugged. "Perhaps his mistress had unusually expensive tastes."

Santiago spent a long moment in silent brooding. At length he said tentatively, "Will you give me a few days to raise the money?"

"Gladly," said Manuel. "And remember, please, that I mentioned appropriate interest."

"How much interest would you consider appropriate?"

"Under the circumstances, an additional half million," said Manuel blandly. "Especially in view of our rampant inflation. The principal and interest together should work out at an even million."

Santiago threw up his hands. "A million cruzeiros!" he cried indignantly. "That is intolerable!"

"Not so intolerable as life behind bars, Senhor, believe me." Manuel stood up. "I shall return here one week from today to collect my money. Be good enough to have it ready for me. In cash, if you please. Meanwhile, I shall leave this tape recorder with you. Perhaps it will prove useful in persuading your colleagues to cooperate with you in paying Almeida's debt to me. Is that agreeable?"

Santiago said, "You will bring me the duplicate tape at that time?"

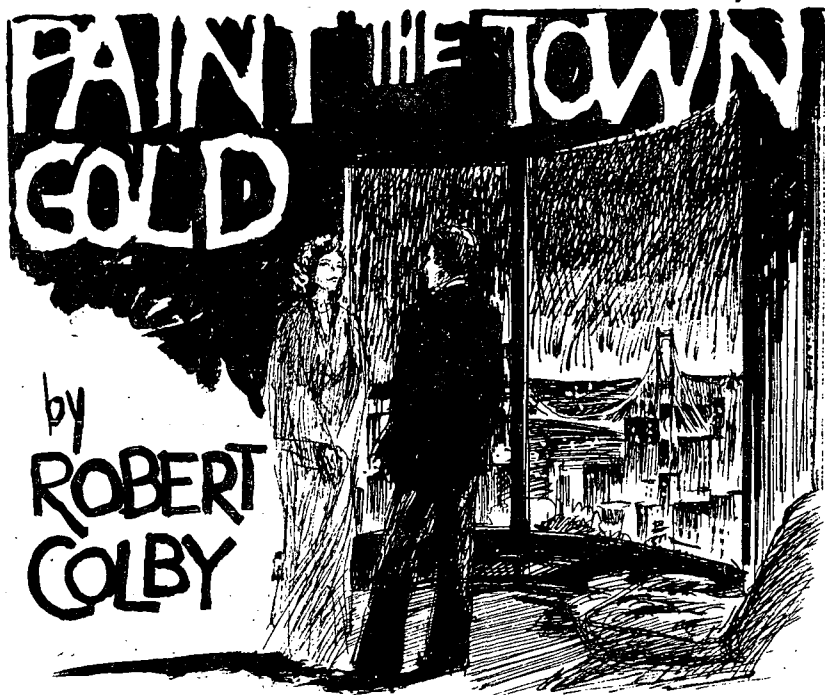
"Certainly. You have my word on it."

"*Muito obrigado*," said the attorney sarcastically. He couldn't deny himself a final protest. "A million cruzeiros is an outrageous sum!"

"In the light of your illicit profits, a million is a mere pittance," said The Photographer. "You'll never miss it. And besides—" he gave the lawyer his lopsided smile "—even a seedy money-lender is entitled to a modest profit, is he not?"

The December 15 issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* will be on sale November 20.

But for the psychic's message from the dead man, the murders might have gone undiscovered for some time . . .



The murder of Stewart and Bernice Wilks and the missing million in gold coins was a national news item. Brock gathered all the details furnished by the media plus a few he gleaned for himself. Then he flew off to San Francisco to try to recover the coins for Trisha Wilks, daughter of the victims.

Though the crime took place in a house isolated on a bluff high above the Pacific in Big Sur, it was reported to the San Francisco police by

Christine Delandro, the psychic and clairaudient, who claimed she had heard the voice of the murdered Stewart Wilks telling her that he and his wife had been shot dead because they refused to disclose the location of all but a hundred double-eagle coins that were kept in their safe. But for Miss Delandro's tip, the crime might have gone undiscovered for some time.

A wiry, ageless man who always seemed a little astonished, as if he had come to an alien planet full of curious beings, Brock climbed off the plane at San Francisco International Airport near dusk and rented a small inconspicuous sedan. Then he drove into town for a meeting with Christine Delandro.

The clairaudient lived on Castleridge Lane in the hills above the moon-dappled bay and the night splash of the city. The sepia-colored Victorian house had carved spindles, tall bay windows, and a cupola crowned by a witch's hat. Perched on a steeply slanted roof of slate-blue was a widow's walk railed with wrought iron.

A Chinese servant in a high-collared black uniform admitted him to the entrance hall, from which a staircase curved upward. The servant led the way to a small octagonal sitting room with mulberry-colored walls, a high bay window, and somber, ornately carved Regency pieces. The room was lighted by electrified gas fixtures. An elaborate fly fan wheeled slowly overhead.

As Brock entered and the servant departed, a burly young man in a crisp glen-plaid suit arose from a teak desk on which he had been perusing a sizable stack of mail—no doubt much of it from people requesting an audience with Christine Delandro, whose fame had spread when she solved a number of murders for the California police.

"My name is Gilbert Corey. I'm Miss Delandro's assistant," the young man introduced himself in the polished manner of an elegant front man. He pumped Brock's hand mechanically, his glossy smile countered by his cool, watchful eyes. He gestured to a chair and sank behind the desk. "Miss Delandro is prepared to give you all the details she has on the murders of Stewart and Bernice Wilks. She's always anxious to cooperate with the law."

"That's fine," Brock said, "but I'm not a policeman."

"Oh?" Corey's face froze. "From your phone conversation Miss Delandro had the impression you were a special agent from the IRS."

"A false impression, I'm afraid. I collect for myself, not for the IRS—I'm

here to help Trisha Wilks for twenty-five percent of her fortune in gold coins, when I recover them."

Corey's eyes narrowed. "Come now, Mr. Brock, that's your cover, and I can understand that. But in truth you're an agent of the government who's here to take up where the police left off, right?"

"Wrong," said Brock.

Corey was not convinced. His expression was a rebuke.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Brock. Unless you're here in an official capacity, Miss Delandro won't be able to take time from her busy schedule to see you."

Brock stood. "No matter. I was merely curious to know why the murdered man was apparently willing to talk to Miss Delandro from the beyond about everything except what he did with a million bucks' worth of twenty-dollar gold pieces the killers never found."

As Corey groped for an answer, Brock said, "In any case, I don't need a dead man to tell me, via Miss Delandro, where he hid his money. I have a little voice of my own that will lead me to that gold, and it's already begun to whisper in my ear."

This was something of an exaggeration, but Brock was curious to see Corey's reaction. After only a moment of reflection, the assistant pressed a button on the desk phone, swiveled in his chair until he had shown Brock the solid wall of his back, and murmured inaudibly into the instrument. Then he swiveled front again, put down the phone, and stood. "Miss Delandro will see you," he declared. "Please follow me."

Corey strode out to the entrance hall and led the way up the curve of stairs. They turned down a hallway and climbed a second, short flight to a dome-shaped room that rose above the roof, the cupola crowned by the witch's hat. After motioning for Brock to enter, Corey went off.

The circular room was ringed by glass walls. For miles in every direction there were stunning views of the spangled city, the bridge spanning the shadowy bay, the lights of Marin County on the far shore. The interior was so dim that for a moment Brock wasn't sure whether he was alone. But then Christine Delandro rose from a wing chair across the room and came toward him.

A young woman, about thirty, wearing a filmy, multicolored caftan, she was a surprise to Brock, who had expected her to be much older and less attractive. She was slender and moved with the fluid grace of a dancer. As dark and tossed as a stormy midnight, her hair swirled about the fine sensitive structure of her face. He especially noted her green

eyes—large, tilted, and wise, yet infinitely sad, as if haunted by a dreadful knowing.

The look vanished with her smile, which was warm and disarming. Extending a delicate hand, she examined Brock with such intensity he had the feeling she was reading his thoughts.

"There's a mystic quality about you. I sensed it on the phone," she told him. "Like me, you're in touch with the nether world, Mr. Brock." She studied him with the look of a painter about to do a portrait. "Yes—and you're exactly as I pictured you." She drew him to a chair and said, "If the room is too dark I can turn on another lamp."

"It would be a sacrilege to glare out a view like this one," he told her.

"Exactly," she murmured. "I've never been able to understand fear of the dark. I love the darkness. And in the night I have my most extraordinary visions."

"I can believe that."

"My night visions are more than physical," she continued, her face grave. "I sit here in the stillness, looking out over the city and thoughts, emotions, and images drift up to me. The sound of voices—some living, some dead."

"Is this where you heard the voice of Stewart Wilks after he was murdered? Sitting here?"

She shook her head and a coil of hair swayed in the hollow of her shoulder. "No. When I heard Stewart Wilks calling to me, I wasn't tuned in at all. It was a bright noontime and I was in a restaurant having lunch with a friend. Suddenly a man's voice broke into my mind and took possession of it, shutting out everything else. 'There were two of them, wearing masks,' the voice said. 'They threatened to kill me and my wife. I told them the gold coins were in the safe we keep in our bedroom closet, and I gave them the combination.'"

There was a long silence. "Is that all the voice said?"

"No. I asked the man to identify himself and he said he was Stewart Wilks, that both he and his wife Bernice had been murdered that morning in their house at Big Sur."

"Did Wilks explain why they were murdered?"

"Must I go over the same story again?" she said impatiently. "All the details were in the newspapers."

"I know. I read every line, Miss Delandro. But newspapers can distort the truth."

"Well, for once I was accurately quoted. The burglars, Wilks told me, found only a hundred of the twenty-dollar gold pieces in the safe, and they knew there should have been fifteen hundred or more. When Wilks swore he had recently sold the bulk of the coins to a dealer, one of the killers aimed a gun at his wife and threatened to put a bullet through her head. Wilks made a grab for the gun and the man shot him dead.

"Bernice Wilks was hysterical with grief and so frightened she quickly admitted her husband had not sold the other fourteen hundred coins. Just the day before he'd said the price of gold might double and he was going to leave the coins in the safe. He had never lied to her, and she was shocked—utterly mystified."

"Of course," said Brock, "they didn't believe her."

Christine Delandro's luminous eyes fired. "They tortured her, Mr. Brock. And when, screaming in agony, she still insisted he had put the coins in the safe, they murdered her."

Brock stared off toward the bridge. The ghostly lights of a freighter loomed up from beneath, its mournful whistle echoing in the distance. "You never did get Stewart Wilks to tell you what he did with the rest of the coins?"

Christine Delandro shrugged. "Trisha Wilks offered me a twenty-five percent share of the coins if I could get the answer from her father. I tried several times, and finally made contact with him. His exact words were: 'How strange, how really typical, that my daughter asks not how I am faring and what it is like in this life after death, but wants only to know what I did with the coins. Greed, all is greed in your world. You will never hear my voice again.'"

She made a wry face. "It's your turn, Mr. Brock— Do you think you can find the coins?"

"Of course," he said with a confident grin. "If I haven't already." He tapped his head with a forefinger. "I have a voice of my own and it's already whispering clues, urging me to hurry and check them out."

She gave him a penetrating look.

"Really, now, Mr. Brock, if you're not a government agent or a policeman, who are you?"

He stood. "I'm a collector." He moved toward the door and turned. "There's a tax on evil, Miss Delandro, and I'm the devil's own collector."

Outside the mansion, Brock climbed back into his rented car and

squinted at his watch under the dashlight. He was early for his appointment with Trisha Wilks. He drove off slowly, setting a leisurely pace as he replayed his interview with the psychic, hoping that Christine Delandro could not read minds as well as the voices of the dead. If so, she'd be aware that she had unwittingly given him a lead that would take him to Big Sur with what might turn out to be the key to the puzzle. Still, before he could work the key he would have to find the lock.

He was within a few blocks of Trisha Wilks' address when he began to track, in his rearview mirror, a pair of headlights that popped up consistently no matter how many times they vanished as he changed direction or melded with a swarm of vehicles. Long ago he had discovered that headlights are never quite anonymous. Each pair has a certain individuality, composed perhaps of the degree of brightness, elevation of beam, size, and/or lateral distance one from the other. This particular pair had its own subtle identity.

Maintaining the same speed, Brock turned a corner, rode for half a dozen blocks, and turned another. The widely spaced headlights, one just a glint brighter than its mate, followed discreetly, not too close. One more corner and he spied an alley that sliced between darkened buildings to his right. He doused his lights and swerved into it, poured gas for a bit, then halted.

Peering through the rear window he saw the tail go past, a couple of men in a long blue Cadillac, vintage early '70s when the models were slightly smaller than a Greyhound bus. He backed wildly, wheeled onto the busy thoroughfare, and began to follow his followers. He trailed them easily to a café in the tenderloin district bearing a small pale-neon legend: DRAKO'S NIGHTHAWK.

Brock had heard of the Nighthawk, a borderline den not frequented by the general public. Ben Drako was supposed to have a finger in several dirty pies, including dope, loansharking, and prostitution. Due, however, to certain contributions, his police record was cleaner than a clergyman's collar.

Brock watched the blue Cadillac nose into the parking lot behind the Nighthawk, waited a cautious interval, then slipped in after it. He parked in deep shadow, zeroing his binoculars on the two men as they mounted the stairs to a door above the café. One was bald and beefy and had a tough florid Irish mug. The other was wiry, with long straight hair the color of pale wet rope. He had a narrow bitter face and a slash of a mouth

that at the moment was lashing at his bald companion, who was ignoring him.

The door opened, there was a wink of light, and the door slammed as they disappeared inside.

Brock hustled across the dim parking area and crept cautiously up the stairs. From an assortment of gadgets in a pocket case, he removed a tiny electronic listening device, fastened it to the door, and put the plug in his ear. There was a heated argument in progress that had to do with the division of a hundred gold coins worth between fifty and eighty grand or more. One of the voices was in a rage because he hadn't yet received his share of the coins. "If I don't get mine here and now," he threatened, "I'm gonna tip the cops!"

Another voice seemed to give in reluctantly. There was the sound of a drawer opening, then a sharp gasp, a long moaning sigh, and silence.

Brock put away the listening device, crept back down the stairs, and, circling to the front of the Nighthawk, entered.

The restaurant had a look of polished antiquity. The interior was done in fine dark woods and fixed with brass lamps that cast a misty glow. A long mahogany bar dominated one side of the room, the opposite wall was lined with plush horseshoe-shaped booths. In the back was a dusky oval room with more booths, each one separated by floor-to-ceiling partitions.

The booths of the oval room were mostly filled with men who might have been executives talking business with quiet, earnest intensity. Some were too flashily dressed, and there was a dark aura of cunning in many of the faces. Brock couldn't see half a dozen women in the entire place. He slid into a booth across from the bar. A waitress came and he ordered a drink.

A few moments later the bald man with the ruddy face appeared. He had changed his clothes, discarding his casual jacket and pants for a royal-blue blazer and grey slacks. Entering from the rear, he moved purposefully to the bar and sat in one of the revolving leather chairs. Soon, chatting confidentially with the bartender, he was hoisting a glass of whiskey.

When the waitress returned, Brock paid for his drink and gave her a generous tip. Then he said, "The fellow at the far end of the bar, talking to the keep—what makes me think I've seen him around? Do you know him?"

"Yes, sir, I sure do. That's Jake Hanlon, one of our regular bartenders. He's been here since we opened. He's off duty now; he usually works the day trick."

"Of course!" Brock beamed. "I didn't recognize him out of uniform."

Minutes later, Brock was again mounting the back stairs to what was probably Jake Hanlon's apartment. Taking the gadgets he needed from his kit, he picked the lock and ducked inside.

Under lights that had been left blazing was a rectangle of living room indifferently furnished and splashed with an atrocious discord of gaudy colors. A huge, scabrous desk dominated one corner. He crossed to it and opened the drawers. They contained an elaborate assortment of electric drills and heavy-duty tools perfectly suited to breaking and entering.

On the chartreuse carpet near the desk was a large splotch—a pale red stain, recently scrubbed. Brock discovered an irregular trail of smaller stains down a hallway to a solid oak door. It took a bit of doing to pick the lock, but when the door opened he found the light switch and stepped into a room filled with boxes and an array of electronic equipment.

The body was in the empty space of the floor—dead center.

The man with the straight blond hair was stretched out on his back. His face slack in death, his eyes closed, he now looked at peace. Newspapers had been spread beneath him to absorb the blood. Though the weapon was missing, it was obvious that he had been stabbed.

Taking a thin pair of gloves from his jacket, Brock pulled them on and felt through the dead man's pockets until he found a wallet. The name on the driver's license was Martin Koenig. His birthdate made him forty-two and the license bore an address in Big Sur. Brock returned the wallet to the dead man's pocket and began to investigate the boxes in the room. Lifting lids, he uncovered television sets, radios, electric ovens, toasters, and mixers. There was a great deal of silverware and a few fur coats—sables and minks—all saleable merchandise, the standard loot of the seasoned burglar.

Across the room was a complex conglomerate of electronic equipment set in a long console with numbered switches, faders, jacks, meters, monitor speakers, and highly professional quality tape-recorders. It could be an expensive hobby, a way to make bootleg copies of commercial cassettes—or something else entirely. Brock moved closer to examine the rig.

In that instant he heard the snick of a key in the front door and he froze. Had he left the living room in order, the desk drawers closed? The lights, he remembered, had been on when he came in, but the light in this room had been out and the door locked. He leaped to the switch and darkened the room, easing the door shut and slipping the tongue of the lock into its metal mouth soundlessly.

The pad of footsteps came closer and he squatted down behind the boxes, squinting through a space between them at the door. It opened with the scrape of a key in the lock and the chunky silhouette of Hanlon loomed in the doorway before the overhead blew the darkness with a harsh light.

Hanlon hesitated, glancing about, as if sensing something out of balance. He closed the door and went to Koenig's body, setting a fold of canvas beside it that turned out to be a tarpaulin. Removing his jacket, he tossed it over the boxes next to which Brock was hiding. Looking up, Brock could see it dangling just above his head.

His muscles thick in his shirtsleeves, Hanlon went to work wrapping the body in the tarp with deliberation, shifting it from side to side as if it were a mannequin. Observing from another small space between the boxes, Brock saw the grip of a gun protruding from Hanlon's hip pocket as he bent to fashion the shroud. This done, Hanlon found some strands of wire in a drawer of the console and used it to secure the tarp from head to foot.

Soon, thought Brock, the body would ride off in the trunk of the big blue Cadillac to some isolated burial ground.

Jake Hanlon moved to the electronic console, his knobby hands flipping switches, twisting dials, and making adjustments as a variety of sounds filled the speakers. The effect was much like that of dialing across a band of radio stations, monitoring each frequency in search of a particular program. Having found it, Hanlon activated one of the tape recorders, listened for a minute, then cut the speakers off and left the tape still recording.

As the purpose of this became clear to Brock, he was fascinated. It was a brilliant piece of engineering and the possibilities it presented were infinite.

For a long moment, Hanlon stood so motionless Brock was sure he'd been discovered and Hanlon was preparing to shove the wall of cartons behind which he was hiding with all his weight. But then the bartender

abruptly snatched his coat from its resting place, yanked it on, killed the light, and went out, the door lock snapping shut behind him with a crack of finality.

Seconds later, the back door slammed.

Brock spent the next fifteen minutes combing the suite with a practiced eye. Carefully restoring the smallest item, he left with the conviction that the one hundred gold double-eagles had been concealed elsewhere.

Trisha Wilks lived on Van Ness in a drab apartment house. Brock parked on a side street, wondering why the heiress lived in such modest circumstances. He entered the building, checked the roster in the lobby, and rode the grubby elevator to the third floor.

Trisha's apartment was Number 3D. He jabbed the buzzer and waited. He tried again, then knocked. The door was not quite closed and it inched inward. He gave it an encouraging nudge, called out, and leaned inside.

A couple of lamps were aglow, revealing a one-room apartment with an alcove kitchen. The place was in cyclonic disorder. Drawers from a built-in dresser were dumped on the floor; a gaping closet spilled forth overturned cartons and a yawning suitcase; dresses, coats, shoes, books, papers—a ton of personal items—were scattered everywhere. The cabinets and drawers of the kitchen had been ransacked.

Not certain that he wouldn't uncover a second corpse, Brock checked the entire apartment, but he didn't stumble upon Trisha Wilks, sprawled in bloody demise.

He got his first look at her—much alive—when he turned to leave. She was standing in the open doorway with one arm rigidly extended, a .38 revolver aimed at his chest. "Go ahead," she challenged. "Make just one move."

"Move?" he said with a spare smile. "I'm barely breathing, Miss Wilks—if that's who you are. In any case, my name is Brock. Your door was open and when I saw that a tornado had just slammed through here I came in to see if you were O.K."

Lowering the gun, she said, "I'm disappointed. I was hoping for a chance to wing a few shots at whoever did this."

Brock snorted. "Did whoever it was think you'd found the coins and were keeping the whole million bucks' worth here?"

She shrugged. "I'm glad you finally made it, Mr. Brock."

"There was an unexpected delay." He studied her. In her mid-twenties,

perhaps, she seemed not quite five feet tall. Her tiny features were framed by rich chestnut hair that draped across her shoulders and down her back. She had large solemn eyes and a wistful expression. She was wearing jeans and a cotton shirt.

"I borrowed this little shooter from a widow who lives on the floor below," she said. "I used to go with a fellow who took me out to the target range twice a week, so I know how to use this." She dropped the gun into her commodious shoulder bag and glanced around the apartment in disgust. "I just went out for a bite and this mess is what I come back to."

"Come on, I'll help you clean it up before we go," Brock said.

"You still want to go to Big Sur—tonight?"

He nodded.

She frowned. "All right. But I don't have a car. Mine finally died of old age."

"No problem. I rented a car at the airport."

"Good," she said. "My father's Mercedes is in the garage at the house. I'll bring it back with me."

He helped her tidy up, then she packed an overnight case.

"You're planning to stay the night in that house?" he asked her with some alarm.

"No." She shut her eyes as if pained by the thought of it. "I went there once, in broad daylight, to search for the coins. I'll never go into that house again. I'll spend the night at the Big Sur Lodge."

When they had left the outskirts of the city and were driving south along Route 1 in very little traffic, he asked her, "How long has it been since you lived at home with your parents?"

She darted a glance at him. In the shadowy light her face looked tense. After an awkward pause, she said, "It's been nearly five years."

"Did you visit them often?" he pursued.

"No," she answered. "Never."

When she said nothing further, he said, "Well, that's understandable. The generation gap is widening."

"I outgrew my parents when I was sixteen," Trisha said, groping for a cigarette and offering him one. He declined but plunged the dash lighter for her. "My father was strict. He had that old-time religion. Anything that was fun was sinful."

Brock laughed.

"By *their* standards I was wild. Smoking, drinking, dancing, late parties—boys. Boys who were, quote, up to no good, un-quote." She sighed. "From the day I was sixteen it was one long argument, especially with my father. I really think he hated me. And sometimes the feeling was mutual. Finally he told me to get out, and I did—with a hundred bucks in my purse. That's all he ever gave me from then until the day he—he was murdered."

Brock blinked his lights at an oncoming car with blinding high beams. "But in the end all was forgiven."

She looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"Well, he left you his entire estate. I call that pretty forgiving. A house, a car, and a million in gold double-eagles—when I find them for you. That's a pretty clear sign of forgiveness, Trisha."

She shook her head and her voice was bitter. "Stewart Wilks would rather have tossed those gold coins to a wino in the gutter. He didn't leave me a dime. He despised me. You see, I was adopted and with all the earmarks of a mongrel lineage—"

"But if he didn't leave you anything—"

"Ah, but unintentionally he did! That's the delicious irony. He died intestate. He *planned* to make a will—his lawyer said so—but he kept putting it off and before he could get around to it— Anyway, when there's no will the estate goes to the nearest heir, here in California at least. And since an adopted child has the same legal status as a blood child, and I'm their only living relative, it all goes to me."

Brock flashed her a grin. "Like me, Trisha, you've got the luck of the devil himself."

"I suppose," she mused, "that if you do locate the coins I'll have to add their value to the rest of the estate and file a report with probate."

"That'll cost you in taxes," Brock said. He added wryly, "You can deduct my twenty-five percent as an expense for recovering the gold."

They slipped through Carmel and pushed south. There was a perfect moon. Full and unblemished by a single cloud, it showered the coastline far below with a soft blue light. A brisk wind churned the sea and blasted the car in gusts that made Brock clutch the wheel tightly. Twisting upward as it ascended toward Big Sur, the narrow road skirted the edge of towering cliffs.

Through swaying Monterey pines they caught glimpses of the Pacific bursting over boulder-strewn sands a sheer breathless drop beneath the highway. Dusted by the moonlight, the water rolled in great cresting hills that swooped down and fell upon the beaches in a tumble of lacy white spume.

A few miles from Big Sur the wind died. Fog rose and billowed in fleeting patches across the road. Inland, a forest of giant redwoods lifted shadowy branches to the heavens. The ocean vanished as they curved into Big Sur, the headlights tunneling through dark stands of trees. A few rustic frame buildings, their hazy neon beckoning tourists, then the tortuous highway climbed to a high summit above a vast spread of the Pacific.

"It's not very far now," Trisha said.

Brock had related his visit with the clairaudient and now he asked, "Do you believe Christine Delandro actually did talk with your father after he was murdered?"

"Yes, I do. Otherwise, there's no way she could have known and informed the police that he and my mother had been killed. The house is so remote it could have been weeks before they were discovered. I don't think she's a fake. She's solved crimes that had the police completely baffled, even told them where to locate the bodies of missing persons buried in the woods and out in the desert."

He nodded. "She has an incredible record."

"And when she made contact with my father to ask where he hid the rest of the coins, the answer was so like him she could've made it up. First he condemned me for not inquiring about his welfare in the afterlife, then he said, 'Greed, all is greed in your world.' God, the hypocrisy! A man who'd been hoarding gold coins all his life!"

"Did your father say exactly how many there are?"

She shook her head. "No. His mouth was tighter than his wallet. And Mother barely spoke to me—except when they were having one of their spats and sleeping at opposite sides of the house. Then she'd get lonely and talk with me the way you would the only other person on a lifeboat. One of those times she told me Stewart had about fifteen hundred twenty-dollar gold pieces in the safe and was thinking of buying more."

"What business was he in?"

"Investments. His family nearly went bankrupt in the '29 crash. That's when he started socking away the double-eagles. The coins will bring

whatever they're paying an ounce for each one, plus the collector's value. So, depending on the market, they're worth a million or so."

"Did your mother ever mention the coins in the safe to anyone other than you?"

"Who would she tell? She never left the house without my father and nobody came to see us in that godforsaken place."

"Any servants?"

"Just me."

"And you never told a friend or a lover or anyone?"

"Not a word."

"All the same, Trisha, the secret *did* get out. How?"

"I haven't a clue," she said.

"Your father told Christine Delandro two men were involved. Perhaps someone who knew the secret enlisted them to do the job. For a share." She was silent.

"Ever hear of a man named Martin Koenig?"

"No." She turned to look at him. "Why?"

"I did some nosing around and I learned he's one of the bad boys who hang around this area. In an exclusive place like Big Sur there can't be very many heavies, and I thought he might be involved."

"The name doesn't ring a bell," she said. "But I've been away a long time."

Now the highway rose and fell. Lonely houses, some of them miles apart, peered from behind trees or winked their lights at the rim of a precipice.

"Do *you* think the coins are in the house?" she asked.

"If I didn't think the coins were in the house I'd be hunting them somewhere else."

"What makes you so certain?"

"It's my gut feeling. And it adds up logically."

"Yes, but I know that house better than anyone else alive and I couldn't find them."

Brock slowed, the long cone of his headlights picking up the mouth of a dirt road seaward of the highway. He wheeled into it, shifting to low gear as he powered up the steep incline that curved through a bower of pines. At the top the trail emptied into a clearing before a wrought-iron gate set in a fieldstone wall.

"I'll unlock the gate," Trisha said as he braked in front of it. She climbed out, scooped a ring of keys from her shoulder bag, unlocked the gate, and swung it wide.

They followed a driveway hemmed by shrubs and flowers through a straggle of trees that bowed and weaved in the ocean breeze. At the tip of a bluff that seemed to hang in the sky, the house was a rambling brown-shingled cottage. Ancient, twisted oaks spread leafy arms above it. The sloping lawn was artfully landscaped, there was a fountain in a terraced garden and a gazebo, but it all had the ragged look of desertion.

Pulling into the oval parking apron beside the garage adjoining the house, Brock cut the motor and lights and they climbed out. Trisha stared at the house, her features pale in the moonlight. "I can't go in," she said. "Their blood is everywhere. I can almost hear the sound of their screaming."

She went to the garage, unlocked it, and turned on the overhead light. Inside was a pale-grey Mercedes not more than a few years old.

"It's hardly broken in," she said. "They seldom went anywhere—" She handed Brock the keys to the house. "The phone is dead, so you won't be able to call me," she said. "But, when you're done, come to the lodge we passed on the way in and wake me up. No matter what time it is. All right?"

"Right," he said.

She took a scrap of paper from her bag and gave it to him. "That's the combination to the safe, in case you want to poke through the account books and papers in it." She got behind the wheel and studied him. "I've got all my chips riding on you. I don't know why—except that you're the only wheel in town." She smiled. "And I think you're a winner."

He watched until the taillights vanished, then walked to the front door.

In the wan glow of two table lamps that sprang on when he flicked the wall switch, he scanned the small living room. The house had a musty brine-tainted odor. Shadows climbed the walls, making weird designs. The deadly hush was made more mournful by the faint whine of the wind and the scrape of branches against the roof.

Deeper into the room Brock saw the rusty stains of blood on the green wallpaper. More stains trailed from the base of the wall along the pearl-grey carpet to a huge spot between the sofas.

Turning on lights as he went, Brock made a quick tour of the house. There were two bedrooms and a study, all with bold views of the sea and

the rock-ribbed majesty of the coastline. As Trisha had said, the safe was in the vast closet of the Wilks's spacious corner bedroom. It was large and formidable. Brock knelt to examine it but remained motionless, listening. The wind was rising and the house was full of alien sounds difficult to identify—muted creakings and mutterings and an insistent dull pounding, as though the front door were being battered down. Then he shook his head, took the combination from his pocket, and opened the safe.

It contained only ledgers and some documents: house and car insurance policies, birth and marriage certificates, tax papers: nothing that gave up any secrets. The ledgers contained an investment record.

He emptied the safe and inspected the interior, tapping it and listening for the hollow sound that would give away a hidden compartment. Satisfied that there was none, he replaced the ledgers and papers and closed the door.

Looking up at the high ceiling of the closet, he thought he saw something. He climbed on top of the safe. Stretching, he could reach the ceiling. He pushed upward. Gradually, the ceiling parted from the wall. There was the metallic complaint of a spring and a ladder eased downward with the ceiling panel. Brock climbed up through the opening into the murky must of an attic and scanned it with light from his pencil flashlight.

There was a dusty welter of patio furniture, an old bureau with empty drawers, two scarred tables, an unshaded lamp—that was it. Descending and restoring the ladder and ceiling panel, Brock left the bedroom and sifted his way back through the house, carefully checking out every drawer and closet, prying up sections of carpet in every room and surveying the floors. He was about to search the garage and the grounds when a sudden hunch sent him back to the Wilks's bedroom.

Turning the closet light back on, he gazed once more at the hulking safe, bent down, and examined the corners. He got a firm grip on the safe and tried to move it. Though it was on casters, it wouldn't roll an inch; the casters were blocked by rubber stops. He wrenched the stops free, but even then it took all his strength to dislodge the safe and wrestle it out of the corner.

His hunch proved correct. There was a pull ring in the floor and, when he yanked it, a door lifted. Beneath it was a large floor safe.

Brock had an unhappy thought. Suppose there were two combinations, one for each safe. But when he tried the same numbers for the floor safe it opened.

Inside were four sturdy metal boxes, compact but heavy. He brought them up from the well of the safe and lifted the lids, his heart beating wildly.

There were four hundred twenty-dollar gold pieces in each of the four boxes—a grand total of sixteen hundred double-eagle coins in such sparkling condition their numismatic value above the gold content would bring the highest price.

The boxes were heavy, and he could carry only two at a time. He brought the first pair to the living room, carting them by their handles—a quarter of a million or so in each hand. And one of the boxes his.

He crossed the living room and set the boxes near the door, then went back for the others. Returning with them, his spirits soared, they seemed nearly weightless. But as he entered the living room, two men sprang from behind a sofa, one with a pump-action shotgun, the other with a .45 automatic.

The man aiming the shotgun at Brock's head was Jake Hanlon. The other, behind the automatic, was Gilbert Corey, in the same natty glen-plaid suit he had worn when he had led Brock to Christine Delandro's tower room. "Put those boxes right down there, Mr. Brock," he said. "Then place your hands on top of your head and stand over there against that wall."

Brock glanced from the outsized mouth of the .45 to the yawning maw of the shotgun and followed Corey's instructions.

While Hanlon leveled the shotgun, Corey looked inside the two boxes, then brought them across the room and set them beside the other two. His eyes gem-bright with triumph, he returned, lifted the automatic from his belt, and released the safety as he tilted the muzzle up to Brock.

"Corey bet me a double-eagle this was where you were headed," Hanlon said, his grin just another crack in the rocky terrain of his face.

"I imagine Corey had a bit of help from Christine Delandro," Brock said. "Did you pull this one for her, Corey?"

He nodded.

"Everything's for her," he said reverently. "In secret, of course. She doesn't have an inkling I'm involved, but she'd be lost without me—her whole world would collapse."

"So Hanlon makes the tapes and you give them to Delandro. Harmless enough, I suppose. But this one was too good to pass up, so you jumped

in with both feet and brought Hanlon along—to do the messy work, I gather.”

“He’s got a big mouth,” Hanlon said. “I’m gonna blow him up and shut it!”

Corey waved him off. “First I want him to tell me how he ran all this down.”

“Martin Koenig gave me the scoop before Hanlon knifed him,” Brock lied.

Corey frowned and shook his head. “I don’t believe you. How would you know Marty Koenig—a landscape gardener here in Big Sur?”

Brock made an educated guess. “Marty did some work for the Wilkses and Mrs. Wilks let the cat out of the bag, confided in him about her husband hoarding gold coins for years.”

“Yeah,” Hanlon nodded. “She had a thing for Marty. And Marty got loaded one day at the Nighthawk and spilled it to me.”

The only one facing in her direction, Brock was the first to see Trisha Wilks standing just inside the front door, her .38 thrust toward the two men in professional straight-arm style, the steady right arm supported beneath in the brace of the left hand.

“Go ahead,” he heard her say for the second time that night. “Make just one move!”

Hanlon did more than that—he made a big move, pivoting halfway around with the shotgun before three bullets slammed rapid-fire into his chest. By then Corey was turned and was taking aim when Brock shot him through the head.

When the echo of the shots had died, Trisha and Brock stared at the dead men, their bodies sprawled nearly on top of each other, their blood mingling as it spread on the carpet.

Trisha said, “I’m not sorry, I’m not sorry at all.”

“Your timing was inspired,” Brock told her, putting his arm around her. “What brought you, Trisha?”

“You,” she answered. “I got to thinking how I really knew nothing about you at all. What if you found the coins, then just flew off with the whole bundle? When I saw that big old Cadillac outside, I got the picture and crept in as quietly as I could.” She started to shake uncontrollably and he put both arms around her and held her.

Christine Delandro came to the door in a modest white robe, the black

tumble of her hair stark against it, her sensitive face troubled, her green eyes startled.

"Mr. Brock," she said, "you said you had news about Mr. Corey. He went out earlier and hasn't returned. Has something happened?"

"Yes, a great deal has happened. May I come in?"

When they were seated, he told her about the entire evening, trying to prepare her for the news of Corey's death as he went.

Her eyes were sad when he finished. She didn't speak for several minutes; then she said, "I never suspected Gilbert was involved in the Wilks crime.

"He was extremely fond of me—worshipful, you might say. But his love was obsessive, abnormal—I never could return it." She released a long breath. "I did love a man. He died in an accident—and then everything went out of me. The psychic power, I mean. I tried desperately to contact him, but I couldn't. I could no longer hear the voices of the dead."

"And if you couldn't get the power back, your career was over."

"Yes."

"But then along came Gilbert Corey," Brock said. "At the infamous Drako's Nighthawk, where the gun-and-stiletto set go to talk shop, he had a contact—the live-in bartender, Jake Hanlon. Corey suggested that you retain Hanlon—at a handsome salary, I would guess—to bug the private booths at the Nighthawk. Every booth a wired confessional, the outpourings taped on the monitoring rig in his apartment, the juiciest tapes turned over to you so you could use the information to make it appear that you'd solved all sorts of dreadful crimes with psychic power.

"Of course, the Wilks job fell into Hanlon's lap while he was serving Marty Koenig, who came hunting for a pro who would steal the coins and share the loot. Hanlon enlisted Corey, and he gave you the scoop on the whole business—in marvelous detail since, unknown to you, he himself was a participant."

She stared at him approvingly. "Mr. Brock, your picture of the whole operation is astonishingly accurate. I believe that you're a true psychic yourself."

"That's possible," he agreed.

"Together," she said, "we would be a matchless pair. You could replace Corey as my assistant. Merely for the sake of appearance. We would actually be equal partners." Her smile was inviting.

"I'm flattered, Miss Delandro." Brock smiled. "But—"

"Please call me Christine."

"Christine. It sounds like a charming and profitable idea, with ecstatic fringe benefits, but it's out of the question. I've always worked alone."

"I wish you'd change your mind, Brock," she said. "It's so late and you haven't slept. Stay the night in Corey's apartment—it's most comfortable."

"I'm sure," he said. "And since I haven't booked a hotel room—"

"Wonderful!" she said with the assurance of one who has already taken complete charge. "I'll leave you there to get settled in and then I'll join you for a nightcap. Would that be agreeable?"

It suited Brock perfectly. While "settling in," he quickly searched the rooms until he found the missing hundred double-eagles. And when Christine joined him it amused him to know that while she was confidently celebrating his acquiescence, *he* was celebrating his departure the next morning. With the last of the missing coins.

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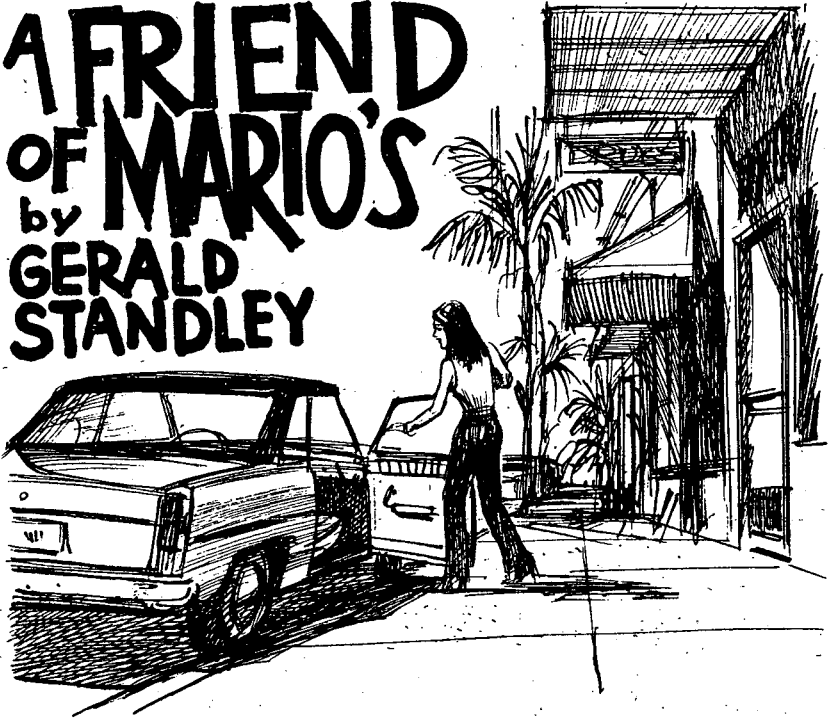
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Sally didn't seem very upset about being a widow . . .

A FRIEND OF MARIO'S by GERALD STANDLEY



The whole affair started in the weirdest possible way. Imagine someone stepping into your car as if she belonged there—only you've never even seen her before and you know she can't think it belongs to someone she knows, because she has just seen you drive up.

I was in a drugstore when it happened. I still had about sixty miles to cover to get back to the university in time for an afternoon class in Spanish Lit. I was hungry but hadn't the time for a meal. Anyway, this drugstore's

air-conditioning was out and the store was even hotter than my car.

I'd noticed her as I'd crossed the sidewalk. She was the kind you'd look at twice even if she weren't wearing smooth, tight slacks. About chin-high to me; slender, lithe, neat, and cool-looking despite the sweltering temperature. Her tanned arms, white blouse, long straight black hair, and unusually intelligent-looking face made it hard for me to take my eyes from her.

When she opened the car door and stepped in, I almost choked on my limeade. There she was, sitting just as pretty as she walked, obviously awaiting my return. Did she have a stick-up in mind? That seemed highly improbable. Was she an exceptionally confident hitchhiker? Possibly, yet that didn't quite seem to be it either. Was she nearsighted? Did she think it was her husband's car? I asked the clerk for a large Coke to go.

I handed her the Coke through the window. She took it just as naturally as I offered it. I went around to my side, glancing at her hands as I got in. No ring except for a small amethyst. There was a flawlessness in her cool that made you admire *her* as well as her looks. She was looking straight ahead with the blackest and brightest eyes I've ever seen.

I started the motor and drove off. After about a hundred yards I remarked, "God, it's hot!"

"The rain can't hold off much longer. I think it's clouding up in front of us." Her voice was low and as pleasant as the rest of her, except that it bore an edge of tenseness.

"My name's Jim Manford," I replied. "I'm not sure where we've met before, but it's great to see you again."

I looked at her now and watched her. She turned her eyes on mine and gave a quick, exciting little laugh that said she was disarmed.

"Even my name is in confidence," she declared. "I'm Sally Queens. Sally Stanley Queens, if you want all of it. Harry Queens was my husband. They charge me with having murdered him."

Whatever I had expected, that wasn't it. She didn't sound very upset about being a widow. I wondered how cold the killing had been.

I tried a light laugh—have you ever noticed how often we laugh when we're caught off guard? "So I'm an accessory, and the police are now chasing two of us."

"They're chasing *me*, without a doubt. But for you to be an accessory I have to be a criminal."

"You're only charged, then. Someone else killed your husband?"

"I have a sister two years younger than I am. She imagined my husband and I were very happy. Because she was jealous, she put a bullet through his head before my very eyes and then told the police I'd done it."

"Good Lord! I hope the fingerprints and things will set the record straight."

There was a long interval before she replied. "The police can be pretty dumb."

I wanted to know more but I waited. There was plenty to think about, that's for sure.

"Would you do me a favor?" I asked her.

"You're doing me one," she said simply.

"Scoot down in the seat so that if any troopers pass us you won't be so noticeable. All they need for a description is 'about twenty-five and very beautiful.' " I turned to look into her eyes again.

Without speaking, she curled up and put her head on my lap. At the same moment the rain came, suddenly and refreshingly. I rolled up the windows, reduced speed, and relaxed. I think she did too.

"Do you want me to know any more about this?" I asked.

"What would you like to know?"

"Whatever you'd like to tell me. Where was your husband killed? What city?"

"Gainesville."

"That's where I live."

"Is that right? What do you do?"

"I teach."

"At the university?"

"Yes. I'm bucking for associate professor."

"What department?"

"Languages."

"Do you speak Portuguese?" For a person who was supposed to be giving information, she seemed to be acquiring a lot of it.

"My French and Spanish are better, but I have some Portuguese. I spent last summer in Rio."

She said nothing, but obviously she had learned something important. She was staring past the instrument panel in thought; her mouth wore a tight look. I laid a hand on her waist. "If you're going with me," I said presently, "you'll wind up in Gainesville again. Shouldn't you be taking some other direction?"

"Do you want to do me a *big* favor?" she asked. From her tone I knew she wasn't merely going to ask me to shut up. She wanted something, and it mattered. Suddenly I felt a genuine sympathy for her. Even if she hadn't been madly in love with her husband, it couldn't be easy to have the police on her trail.

"Your head is in my lap," I reminded her.

She gave me a short laugh.

"Tell me what it is," I added. "It's hard to say yes or no without knowing what you want."

She looked up at me, then at the windshield wipers scraping away. "I'm going to Gainesville instead of away from it because I want to put the police on the right trail. I think if I can get to talk with my sister, I can get her to confess the truth. If I have a witness, there'll be some chance of a court's—of their seeing the truth."

"And I'm the witness?"

"You're more than that. I think you might be the one person in the world who can get my sister to talk with me."

"Hold on just a minute," I objected. "How can I get your sister—whom I've never met—to talk with you when no one else can?"

I had slowed down for another little town. I didn't want to give the local police any reason to stop me until I had freed myself of my new chum. And I didn't feel particularly pressed to get rid of her. There was a lot I wanted to know: the details of the killing, how she had *left* Gainesville, why she had started back even before meeting the one person in the world who could help her.

I had had a good time finding out what little I knew so far. She was every bit as engaging as I had guessed.

"Where can we go?" she was saying.

"You can't answer my question here?"

"I mean where can we go to carry out the plan?"

"What plan? Look, isn't it time you gave me some details? We'll soon be in Gainesville."

She fumbled with her bag, opened it, and offered me a cigarette. I declined and pushed in the lighter. She was silent.

After she had exhaled the first time, she spoke. "Well, it happens that this sister of mine is in love with a Brazilian boy named Mario Barbosa."

"Mari-oo Bar-baw-sa," I corrected her. "Portuguese vowels are somewhat different from Spanish."

"And if you were to get her on the phone and tell her in Portuguese that you're a friend of his and have a present for her, she'd come meet you. That's why we need a place."

I could see that.

"How about a motel?" she reflected. "If you're just driving through town you couldn't be expected to know how to get to her house."

"How do I register you?"

She simply looked at me, her mouth less tight now.

"Which motel would be best?" I wondered.

"One where you think we'll be least noticed."

We reached a string of motels on the south side of town just as the rain tapered off. I turned in at one that looked quiet, parked a few yards from the office, and slid out from under Sally's head.

"Suppose you stay as inconspicuous as you can in case any cops are around," I suggested.

At the office I registered us as Mr. and Mrs., then went with the man to Room 14. When he had satisfied himself nothing was lacking, I brought the car as close to the door as I could. For the few steps from the car to the room, I screened Sally by staying on the side toward the road.

Under other circumstances I would have taken her in my arms once the door was closed, but now I said, "What's your sister's name and phone number?"

Sally, sitting on the bed, looked momentarily flustered. "Her name's Cecilia. The number—you'd better look it up. She's listed under my father's name."

I opened the phone book. "Which is?"

"Henry A. Stanley."

"Will your father be at home?"

"Not likely. Cecilia herself should answer. If Mother answers, ask for Cecilia."

I rang the number, thinking how different things might be if the woman for whom I was Galahading were less entangled in widowhood and crime.

A voice quite like Sally's answered. "*A Senhorita Cecilia Stanley está?*"

"*Sou eu que fala,*" she said. Her voice seemed just a trifle guarded.

Sticking to Portuguese, I told her I was an acquaintance of Mario Barbosa, who had asked me to be the carrier of a present to her when he learned I was coming to the States.

While I was talking, I watched Sally. She seemed to show faith in me. It was clear she didn't understand a bit of the conversation. I could be asking Cecilia to call the police, for all she knew.

Cecilia wanted to know where I was. Could I come out to the house? I declined the invitation but accepted her offer to come to the motel to pick up the present. She said to expect her in about twenty minutes.

My part was over now, except as a witness. Sally waited, however, with growing tension. She chain-lit her cigarettes. At first I tried to keep a conversation going, but it seemed to annoy her.

"This sister of yours—she won't be trying to knock anyone off before she leaves, will she?"

Sally shook her head. But she opened her handbag again and calmly drew out a very mean-looking little .32.

That jostled me into speech again. "Please don't go waving that at her unless it's really called for. While you're being sought for a murder you didn't commit it would be a shame to rack up one of your own."

She gave no reply, not even a smile. Her sparkling eyes were now narrowed—whether to avoid the smoke or the better to concentrate, I couldn't tell. I appeared to be forgotten.

Twenty-eight long minutes after I had hung up from talking to Cecilia we heard a car ease to a stop on the gravel outside. Through the slits in the Venetian blind I saw a second Sally emerge, even more beautiful than the first. Slightly taller, and wearing a flowered print dress, Sally's sister looked like something off the calendar in the body shop that had been dressed with taste.

And *she* was single!

Sally went into hiding in the bathroom as Cecilia knocked. I opened the door.

Her eyes were not as brilliant as Sally's. Instead of hard fire, here was warm hypnosis. Sally looked into your psyche; this girl made herself at home in your entire subconscious. She stepped inside, her eyes, gently reproving, seeming to say, Now what's all this hokum about a gift from Mario? But "*Senhor Tiago, tanto prazer,*" she said.

I assured her in my most Latin manner that the pleasure was entirely mine, that obviously our friend Mario had great confidence in his fiancée to have permitted—much less encouraged—even a trusted friend to call on her. "The most faithful friend a man has may find his own heart

indefensible," I concluded before I remembered that she had shot her brother-in-law.

Cecilia's soft, searching eyes looked from me to the bathroom door. There wasn't even a gasp of recognition. Her eyes didn't change expression.

But when I turned around, my eyes almost popped out of my head. I hadn't counted on seeing the .32 again so soon, and I certainly hadn't expected to see it pointing at me.

I looked back at Cecilia. She appeared cautious but in perfect command of herself. My eyes questioned her.

She spoke. "*De vagarzinho.*"

"Slow and easy does it" would be a good translation.

"Translate that!" barked Sally.

"I told him to do as you said, Sally."

Desperately I brought my thoughts to heel. There must be some explanation of this fantastic situation. Some way to get that revolver pointed in some other direction long enough to. . .

"Sally, what was it you wanted me to testify to?"

She glared at me, her eyes like two diamonds—glittering and hard.

"Hit the floor!" Cecilia cried and, without thinking, I did just that. At the same moment everything broke loose. I remember a lot of light, a crash, and then a sickening odor that choked me. I doubled up, wondering if I was hit or not, and if so where.

I found myself standing outside in the courtyard leaning on my car, a pair of cops looking at me while I came to. With them was Cecilia, her cool gone. In its place was apprehension and obvious relief. "You lucky fool," she said.

Her eyes were misty with concern. They were beautiful eyes.

"Just tell me what this is all about, will you?"

"The gas got you as well as Sally, but you'll be all right soon."

"And Sally?"

"She's been in a correctional institution, part of the time sane and part of the time not. She shot her husband three years ago. She was out of her mind then, and she blamed it on me. Since then she's become so obsessed with the idea that she's paying for a crime I committed that her notion of revenge was to shoot you and say I did it. To her way of thinking, that would be justice.

"In another two seconds she would have fired. I'd have opened the door sooner, but there had to be a split second when you had some protection."

"But why didn't the police come in with you—or instead of you?"

"That way there probably would have been at least one death. They knew she was armed and we guessed at her thinking."

"But you stuck your neck out for a total stranger."

She gave me a little smile that went clear to the bottom of my libido. "Don't forget, you're a friend of Mario's."

I said a silent prayer for Mario.

"That's how I knew I should bring the police," she added. "Mario's been dead for over two years."

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Thursday night was money night at Pete's Place . . .

PUTTING IT ON THE LINE



It's been a year since Delaney . . . I still get twinges.

Which is dumb. I've got nothing to feel guilty about. I didn't know anything about his private life.

Nobody in Pete's Place did. We knew him as a semi-regular, a guy who came in three, four times a week, and always on Thursday night, which is money night. A small, amiable guy in baggy work pants and a worn denim jacket and a crummy-looking grey cloth cap—he was a janitor

somewhere. He drank reasonable amounts of beer and never made a fool of himself—except when he shot pool.

Not that he was a bad player. He wasn't. He was pretty good. He knew the angles, had an O.K. stroke—could make some excellent shots. *Could* make them—but when the money was down, you could count on it, he'd flub. He was a doubter. In pool, if any doubt sneaks in, it takes over, and there goes the shot. Which is why Delaney always blew it in a money game with one of the heavy hitters.

As I said, Thursday night is money night. It isn't announced on the six o'clock news, invitations aren't sent—it's just known. Thursday night, if you're a heavy hitter looking for some action, you show up at Pete's Place.

Pete's is a pleasant enough dump near the tracks in Lindenvale. It's got a long bar, slot machines, a shuffleboard, and a pool table—regulation size, with a slot for your quarter. The walls are mostly old photographs of fighters but there's one wide clear space with a sign composed by Pete's granddaughter Lily, age eight, who used green, yellow, blue, and red crayon alternately to letter out, 8-BALL ONLY NO GAMING ALLOWED.

But Thursday night the rule doesn't apply, except to the extent that you don't loud-mouth your bets or wave money around. The guy who's won the last game owns the table. If you want to take him on you catch his eyes and flip two fingers very quick, or three, or five, or maybe all ten—or maybe go higher, with some other signal system. If the guy starts chalking up you've got yourself a bet. If he racks up his stick, no bet, and *you* own the table—and somebody else throws a signal at *you*.

For the payoff, the loser, after fiddling in a pocket, shakes hands with the winner, which makes the winner as much richer as the signal called for.

In short, it's a well run game—no dickering around, no wasted words, all business. A guy makes a bet, you don't ask to see his money. No faking, no welshing—if somebody pulled that the word would get to Pete and that somebody would have earned himself the big 86—his heavy hitting days in Lindenvale would be over.

All the action goes on with Pete's full knowledge; he works the bar himself Thursday nights.

Sometimes a newcomer too drunk, or stupid, or both, to focus on how the betting's done, might yell out to the guy owning the table, "Five says I take you!"

Then the table owner falls back a step or two, looking astonished and

horrified, like someone who's heard dirty words in church. And Pete, behind the bar, aims his evil-looking little black beard at the blasphemer and yells, "Can't cha read the sign?"

"Aw, come on, all these birds are—"

"There's a city ordinance against betting in public places! Do you want me to lose my license?"

If the guy continues to argue, that's it. Pete flips open the shelf and comes out, and he's five-foot-six and sixty years old, but all cold fire and hot bristle. He used to be a welterweight and a good one, top ten in *Ring* in the days when top ten meant something. He daggers his beard at the dumbo, bites off one word—"Out!"—and points to the door. Case closed. Dumbo departs.

Only one time I saw a guy who didn't. He was from another town and had the name of a bar, MALLEY'S LOUNGE, across the back of his blue bowling shirt. He had sixty pounds on Pete and a mean heat on. He informed Pete and everyone else that the man hadn't been invented who could make him leave a bar before his drinking was done.

He said, focusing on Lily's sign on the wall, "You don't even know how to spell." As if that justified anything.

Pete said, "My granddaughter made that sign."

"Too bad she's retarded."

He got two stiff left jabs in the mouth and a right hook to the belly and left off being witty. He invested in a roundhouse right that brought no dividends. He started another, but a very fine right hook to the jaw sent him over backwards onto the pool table. After a reasonable time he opened his eyes, swiveled them around till they found Pete, moved his head a little, and groaned.

Pete told him in a polite way to please stop tying up the table.

The guy thumbed blood off his lips, fingered his jaw, mumbled that it felt broken.

Pete agreed that it might be. The guy flopped his legs around and fell off the table. He got up off the floor and stood, fairly wobbly. He looked at Pete and opened his mouth to say something, but I guess he decided that wasn't a good idea, and he turned and wobbled on out, fingering his jaw. I never saw or heard of him ever coming back in.

That's the way it turned out for the one guy I ever saw who tried to carry on an argument against the house rule of NO GAMING ALLOWED—which, after all, is the city ordinance.

Delaney, though, not Pete, is who this story started to be about. So allow me to proceed to tell what happened that Thursday night a year ago.

First, though, I should mention the talk I had with Delaney a couple of weeks previous, on a Friday morning, which will make clear why I still get twinges—because if you try to change somebody's outlook and the guy takes your advice and subsequently things turn into a disaster, you have a tough time convincing yourself that you don't bear *some* responsibility, no matter how good your intentions were in the first place.

I myself am pretty much a fixture at Pete's. I'm there early in the morning—it opens at six—and the first thing I do is have a long, slow bottle of Rainier Ale. I talk to whoever's there—and if no one's there or no one wants to talk, I look at the old photos on the walls and go off on a journey into the past. I've always been a fight nut and as I think I mentioned the walls at Pete's are plastered with pictures of old-time gladiators.

Champs and near-champs, Marciano and Da Preem and Hammerin' Henry Armstrong, Basilio and Baer—both Baers—Hostak and Steele and Canzoneri, Kid Gavilan, Lou Ambers who was Luigi Ambrosini, and Galento who trained on beer, and of course the great Louis, lots of pictures of him. And the great Robinson, the *original* Sugar Ray, and lesser lights that the younger guys never heard of nor most of the older guys either. They all send me riffling through the pages of the old memory book because, like I said, I'm a life-long fight nut and once dreamed of winning personal glory in that area. Lesnevitch and Durrelle the Fighting Fisherman and Nova the Yoga Man, Arrogant Art Aragon, Slapsie Maxie, Young Corbett, Benny Paret. I remember how, that Friday morning, I was into my second ale and looking at the photo of Paret, and thinking of things, and someone took a stool near me. It was Delaney.

He said good morning and that I looked a little depressed. He said it in his quiet, non-pushy way.

I said, "Yeah, depressed. But not for Paret. For myself."

His eyebrows hooked several questions at me as he got his Schlitz from Debbie, who's one of Pete's daughters (he has five). I told him and Debbie about Paret's career and how it ended, which is always a shock when it happens but shouldn't be surprising, because the ring's a dangerous place and everyone who climbs in isn't going to walk out. Which guys who climb in are aware of.

"So," said Debbie, who had heard Delaney's opening remark, "what are you depressed about?"

"Because I never did."

"Never did what?"

"Put it on the line."

I had her bring me another ale and started to tell how I'd always dreamed of being a fighter and when I was a teenager whenever I was alone I shadow-boxed like a lunatic—did push-ups and ran everywhere to get strong legs. I dreamed of battling up the ladder and finally climbing in the ring with Dempsey himself, who was champion in those years, taking his best shots and finally knocking him cold as a wedge.

That was my dream—and it stayed just that. I never tasted a mouth-guard, never had my hands taped, never knew what it was to take a professional punch, or throw one. I never climbed in a ring, never took the chance of having my dream showed up as silly. Continued hoarding it. And the years went by and of course the dream withered and died. I kept on working at the paint warehouse and that was O.K., it was a good enough job, I did all right. I have no regrets for what I did with my life—only for what I didn't do. I never risked the dream—never put it on the line.

I said all that and it took a while, and during it Debbie went away to trundle cases of beer from the back room to the ice chest. I couldn't blame her. What twenty-four-year-old wants to listen to tales of the past by a seventy-two-year-old who's slightly plastered at seven in the A.M.?

Delaney listened, but he was pretty much trapped. But he *was* listening—I could tell. And that kept me going with the story because, although it rambled around, I had started with the intention of telling him something.

And now, having told it, I got down to the point of it. "If you really want to do something, you've got to figure it's worth putting on the line."

"I guess that's right."

"You say that, but you don't do it." A guy almost through his third bottle of breakfast ale talks a lot more straight-on than he does otherwise. "I've watched you at the pool table. Last night you challenged Sal DeSicily."

Delaney gave a rueful smile, murmured, "Sal's out of my league."

I agreed.

Because Sal's the best that comes in Pete's—him or Bennett. Older

guys, sixty and up, not pros but they used to be, at least Sal did. His name isn't really DeSicily, but it's a long one no one feels up to tangling with, so he's Sal DeSicily. I've heard he used to make a lot of money at pool for a lot of years. Then he gave up the big time. He has some candy and gum machines placed around Lindenvale and nearby San Belcarlo, and he plays pool now for extra bucks—and the pride and fun of being the best in Pete's Place. If Bennett isn't the best.

Bennett's retired, a part-time bartender at the other working-stiffs' dump in town, the Moonduster. I don't know much about his pool background, but he obviously has one. They're both fine players and good guys who don't hustle and don't pluck pigeons. They're serious at the table because that's the one place they're very good.

I signaled Debbie and she brought me another ale, and another Schlitz for Delaney, and I took a few pulls at my bottle and said to Delaney, "I kept a dream on the edge of my life—until finally it withered and fell off, which dreams do if they don't get nourishment."

That's the way I talk on my fourth ale—kind of on the poetic side, expressing things the way I don't when I'm sober.

Delaney gave me his dim smile. "I'm forty-five. I'm no kid dreaming I'll be the new Minnesota Fats. I enjoy the game, but it's strictly for fun."

"So you signal two dollars or at the most three and Sal smiles and is polite as always, and wraps you up in a hurry. You're an O.K. player—in fact, you're good—but the size of your bet and your whole manner says right off you're fixing to lose. So you do. Sal gets you back to the bar quick, because Thursday night there's no room at the table for guys who are lying to themselves when they say they're just playing for fun."

He looked at me and his big Irish eyes didn't look comfortable. Which was all right because it wasn't my business that morning to make him feel comfortable.

I took another pull at the bottle. "You can play Sal any time for fun and practice, and you do, and you even beat him sometimes. Or Bennett. And that's good, but what you want to do is beat one of 'em on Thursday night when it counts. I claim that when you say you play for fun on Thursday nights, you're lying. You wanted very much to beat Sal last night."

He looked at me and his eyes stopped looking uncomfortable and got clear, like a guy's do when he's decided to stop kidding himself. He said softly, "You are so right."

"You dream of winning, which is why you come in on Thursday, and you put up your two or three dollars so nobody'll think you're taking things serious and after you get beat you can tell yourself, 'Well, that game didn't really mean anything—I wasn't going flat out. If I really did go flat out, who knows? I may be as good as Sal, or even better.' And you tell yourself that one day you *will* go flat out, and then everybody'll know just how good you were all the time. So the dream stays alive and well and you have it to fondle in private and put next to your pillow to go to sleep by."

I finished my bottle and got the dizzy feeling that lets me know when things have reached the fork in the day's road. To drink, or not to drink? Years ago I'd reach that fork and drink on like a ring-tailed wonder. But those days have passed under the bridge along with all the booze.

I got off the stool. "If the dream's more than a woolly toy, put it on the line. See if there's any more than hot air under the wool."

I tapped him on the shoulder and went across the big dark room to the far corner table, sat down, and put my head down on my arms. The ale set up rhythmic waves, a rhythm to snooze by.

But I got a tap on the shoulder and opened my eyes. Delaney's big clear ones were looking down at me.

He said, "It isn't just a big bet, is it?"

I started to sort out what that meant. He helped me out. "I mean, if I bet fifty bucks, that wouldn't necessarily mean I was putting things on the line, would it?"

"It'd mean you were betting fifty dollars—which would mean whatever fifty dollars means to you. Would it make an impression? Sure, it'd do that."

"But that's not what I'm after, is it?"

"I don't know what you're after. Only you do—if you do."

He looked at me, not saying anything. Then he said, very softly, "I don't think I've ever committed myself to anything."

I swallowed a belch that had sneaked up on me. "Life is a game, and pool is the game of life." That's the way I get after one morning ale too many.

The belch sneaked back; took me by surprise, and jumped out in public, proud and defiant.

Delaney waited politely until it had rumbled away into silence. Then he said, "I never took a shot at any of the things I wanted." It was very

uninteresting to me all of a sudden. The waves in my head were getting turbulent. I laid my head down again and closed my eyes. His voice went on: "Thanks for the beer and the talk. You've given me something to think about."

"Good."

The waves took over and I slid under them, which was the place for me at that point in time.

That was my conversation that Friday with Delaney. What it might lead to, if anything, I didn't know. I knew I'd got tired of watching him fiddle around with his two- and three-dollar challenges, which meant only that he was playing to lose. It was too much like looking back on my own non-commitments. I saw too much of who I'd been in Delaney. I'm Irish too, and one of the six or ten prime Irish curses is a tendency to fiddle on the edge while life goes by—to be reluctant to risk the dream, because maybe it's all that stands between the Irishman and a very bleak reality. And time passes, and the dream turns into a glob of ash and blows away.

That next Thursday night Delaney didn't show at Pete's, which was a rarity. Sal was there; and Bennett, some other heavy hitters—Jorst Flint, who'd be good if he didn't make every shot a power play; Jim Roper, who's excellent until he gets drunk—which is rapidly; Mal the Mountain Man; LaMotte who only The Shadow knows; others. There were some good matches but nothing spectacular. Sal held the table a while, winning mostly five-dollar bets, and after a while Bennett put his quarter in the slot, not having to signal because five dollars is their standing bet. They played their usual model game, strictly technique, nothing really on the line. Bennett won, then knocked off three contenders, then for two bucks played and lost to a goofy-looking guy who had a herky-jerk stroke that completely blew Bennett's concentration. Twice he took off in a hurry for the bathroom, where he probably stuffed paper towels in his mouth to stifle a fit of hysterical laughter. Finally he scratched the eight-ball and gave the guy a quick handshake and half ran out the door and didn't come back. I watched two more guys scratch out—the guy was a menace to mental health. I got very nervous just watching, and went home.

The next week passed and I didn't see Delaney. I asked Pete if he'd been in but he hadn't. I didn't spend much time wondering about him.

I'd told him what I did because he seemed a quiet, decent guy who'd annoyed me by being too much like I used to be. Whatever he made of our talk was no big thing to me.

So the Thursday night I want to tell about came.

No Delaney. Roper won the table, drank his way through a hot streak, then got too fuddled to see what he was shooting at and hung up. Bennett took over, got a challenge from Sal after half a dozen wins, and they conducted their customary seminar for the studentry. This time Sal won, chopped up LaMotte and The Mountain Man in a hurry, and glanced around for the next awr-derve.

It was just past 10:00 now. The goofy-looking guy was on deck, and he spread his hand quick, then tapped his belt buckle three times, which was interesting to Sal. He'd watched this bird screw everyone up last week and didn't want it to happen to him. Not for fifteen dollars.

So he got right down to business. He got two stripers on the break, then knocked in four more. Then he missed. The guy did his frantic herky-jerk and the cue ball jumped off the table.

Sal then popped in his last striper and the eight-ball, and that took care of the goofy guy, who'd thought everyone went to pieces last week because of his finesse, when actually it was just the general neurotics he created.

A short guy in a smooth-looking dark suit had come in and was standing near my stool, watching things. I'd just glanced his way, then gone back to watching Sal wind up the game. I watched him take the goofy guy's handshake along with fifteen bucks. Then his quick Siciliano eyes skidded around to pick up the next challenge.

They stopped just past me. They'd been caught by the guy in the good-looking suit. I looked over and up. It was Delaney.

Delaney like I'd never seen him, because I'd never seen him except in his worn and baggy clothes and crummy cap. He had on this suit, gleaming new shoes, a white shirt and a soft red necktie, and on his head a very spiffy narrow-brimmed dark hat. His face was pinkish, with a shine like he'd just shaved, and I got an aroma of old leather or old salami or whatever scent they put into manly after-shaves. His big eyes looked alert, and he had a little smile.

"Delaney," said Sal in his raspy voice, "I didn't recognize you. You look very good."

"I feel good, Sal."

"Good. Feel like shooting a game?"

"Long as I'm here I guess I might as well."

"Good," said Sal, and his eyes flicked down to pick up the usual two- or three-finger signal.

Then just for a second his eyes stretched wide. I couldn't see what surprised him—Delaney's hand was in front of him and the way he was standing only Sal could see it. But Sal's look was like what he saw was the last thing he'd expected. Just for one second. Then he looked away and, looking very casual, studied the tip of his pool stick and murmured, "I see . . . that this tip could use some chalking up."

"If that's what you see, it must be so," said Delaney.

I got it. Delaney must have held his hand flat, knuckles down, three fingers tucked in, thumb and forefinger hooked in a sideward curve.

And Sal had thrown back, *Is that a C you're signaling?* And Delaney had answered, *You got it. C's the call.*

C, of course, is a hundred dollars. So Delaney was signaling a hundred.

I didn't know if any of the guys along the bar had got it—Sal's and Delaney's words had been low and super-casual. But everyone knew something different was happening, and maybe some of them flashed on the same memory I did—the memory of Jackie Gleason in *The Hustler*, toggging up like a board chairman for big-money matches.

It was like Delaney was making an announcement—*I'm good, and I'm here to win, and I'm dressed for it. And I'm not scared to put my intention out in the open where anyone can look at it.*

I tell you, I was excited. I looked at this small Irishman in his fine new clothes and thought, My words triggered something in him. He'd got fed up with creeping around the edge. Now he was making a commitment.

Pool may be a pretty dumb thing to make your commitment to. But that misses the point—the point is commitment itself. By his own words, Delaney had never committed himself to anything. Now he was doing it for the first time.

Sal had started to walk around the table, to get in position for the break after Delaney fed in his quarter and racked up the balls. But Delaney still hung near the bar. So Sal stopped and gave him a sharp, questioning look—*More?*

Delaney's right hand reached back for his glass on the bar. Just before it got there it flipped up, spread. I saw all five fingers. Then he picked up the glass and brought it to his lips. He sipped, looking at Sal.

Sal was quiet for a little. He had a tight little smile and his eyes were

very bright. Then he set his stick against the table and said, "Excuse me just a little bit—O.K.?"

"Sure," said Delaney.

Sal walked fast to the back door and out.

The guys drank, looked at the table, looked at Delaney, looked at the walls, talked to each other low. Delaney drifted over to the cue rack, started sorting through it. He took a cue, hefted it, frowned at the tip, put it back, took another. He whistled a little—I got the air, "Oh the days of the Kerry dancin' . . ." He seemed very at ease with himself.

Pete was at the bar near me. He leaned on it and said low, "Where'd Sal go?"

"Maybe, to make a phone call."

"Pay phone's right there on the wall."

"Uh-huh. But maybe he wants it private."

"Big bet?" Pete's quick, but he hadn't caught this one.

I just shrugged. He shrugged back. He wasn't going to push me.

Bennett came over and asked Pete to fix a highball. He gave me a one-corner smile. I knew by his eyes that he had caught the bet.

I asked, "Who's Sal calling?"

"Mushy, I suppose."

"Who's he?"

"A guy in San Belcaro."

It was my turn not to push. But I gathered Mushy was a guy who, if you got a bet that was too rich, you'd call him and he'd back it—or he wouldn't. I'd known Sal used to be a pro. I guessed Bennett used to be too. Anyway, pro enough so he knew about Mushy.

I kept at my beer as Delaney racked up the balls, whistling "Kerry" soft. He took his time racking, making no doubt a tight but not too tight rack. There are lots of little subtleties to pool when you're out to win.

Then he came over and ordered another beer. He shot me a look and murmured, "Flat out."

I nodded.

Pete said, giving him his beer, "That's a nice-looking suit."

"Thanks. I thought maybe I was due one."

"You look good." That was Bennett.

"I feel good."

Pete looked at the clock on the wall, which said 10:30. "It's taking Sal a little."

Bennett said, "He'll be back to play."

Which meant that if Mushy had told him no he'd have been back in a couple of minutes and hung up his stick. Time was passing because he was waiting at the phone booth for Mushy to come with the extra money he needed to cover Delaney's bet.

I looked at Delaney and wondered where he'd got five hundred dollars to bet. He could be a richer guy than I thought. Because he was a janitor and had never dressed good before didn't necessarily mean he didn't have money. He could have a mattress full. I knew nothing of his life outside Pete's.

Sal came in the back door. His quick eyes found Delaney at the bar and he gave a tight smile and said in his raspy voice, "Sorry to keep you waiting."

He went to the table, picked up his stick, chalked it, set up the cue ball, looked over the rack, took some deep breaths, went into his professional crouch, sighted, and fired.

A solid break, wide scatter of balls, two balls dropping, a striper and a solid. Table still open. Sal clipped off two more solids. He was sharp, very much with it, mouth set, his eyes hard and cold now—all concentration. Twelve-ball, thin cut, plunk. Then a combination bank, two-ball taking off from the far-side cushion at a wide angle, coasting into the cross-court corner pocket. Which left two solids on the table, and the eight-ball. Along with the cue ball, which sat near center.

He took a long time looking things over. The six-ball near the far-side pocket (far side being the side furthest from me) was blocked by a striper, another striper blocking a long cut to the far-corner pocket. The other solid, the fourteen, lay midway on the end rail, glued there. A tough shot in prospect.

I saw motion at the back door and looked. A fat little guy had come in. He wore a grey suit. He stopped at the far end of the bar and Pete went down to serve him. I wondered if he could be Mushy, stopping in to have a look at his investment.

It was looking good. Sal lined up on the six-ball and cut it fairly wide—it came off the side cushion and tucked in very neat just next to the fourteen on the rail, bumping it down the rail—it got just enough legs, and dumped into the hole.

Along the bar were murmurs. Three or four let out soft yells, and a few applauded. I didn't, Bennett didn't—Delaney was standing near us.

His eyes were bright—he didn't look tense. He felt my eye on him, switched me a glance, and a wink came with it. Like he was saying, Sal's Sal—but things might work out. If I get a shot—things might work out.

Sal was computing his next shot. Six-ball midway along the end rail, just off it—cue ball near center table, dead up on the six. Eight-ball at the other end, three stripers more or less around it. He'd try a bank on the six, the same way he'd just banked on the fourteen—this one an easier shot, not a combination, and the six not glued to the rail. If he made it he'd probably have no shot on the eight-ball. Some places you have to hit the eight-ball when it's the last one, or it's a scratch, and you lose. But house rule at Pete's is that you don't have to hit it. Sal sighted on the far-side cushion for his bank on the six, used outside english on the cue ball, stroked easy, brought it up snug alongside the six, which took off as planned, ran out of gas, teetered on the lip of the hole, and fell in.

"When skill fails, pray for gravity," Sal rasped, breaking his own tension.

More murmurs and yells, and a scatter of clapping along the bar.

Now all Sal had left was the eight-ball. But he couldn't get at it this time—so he called "Safe," meaning he wasn't calling any pocket, and double-banked the cue ball up behind the striper next to the eight-ball, bumping it at an angle, which bumped the eight-ball clear.

Which brought Delaney to bat, with a long road to go—and no room for a flub.

Delaney moved from the bar, got the stick he'd settled on from the wall, stood over the cue ball, figuring things. His easiest shot lay right next to the near-end corner pocket, across the table from me.

But he lined up on the nine-ball down at the far end and bent and aimed—and the eye I could see was clear and his shoulders were relaxed and his hand on the stick was firm and easy. He hit slow but strong and the cue ball banked and took the nine from the rear; the nine slid down the table at just the right angle and took the ball near the corner pocket and dumped it in. A very smooth, thinking-man's shot, leaving the cue ball with good prospects. A shot like Sal or Bennett would be glad to make.

Sal said, "Nice."

Delaney shook his stick once to acknowledge, then with the position he'd played for dumped, bing and bing, two stripers near the middle into

the far-side pocket. And now a striper was near the far-end rail midway, and the other two were down toward the near end, close together near the eight-ball. The far-rail shot was the one to go for.

It called for a long bank of the cue ball, off the far-side cushion. He lined up, shot smooth, hit just right—bull's eye. The bar let him know we appreciated, and Sal nodded and gave his tight smile.

Now Delaney was positioned so he just might peel the ball closest to the eight-ball past it, into the near-corner pocket. Outside english was called for. Delaney called for it and got the answer he wanted.

One striper to go, and cue ball right on it. An easy nudge—the last striper went to bed.

Now the cue ball lay right in front of the pocket, twelve inches from the eight-ball—and the two of them, white ball and black ball, almost a straight diagonal to the far-side corner pocket.

Line up, stroke smooth and easy, hit just off center—there was no way he could miss this shot.

No way? Don't kid yourself. There were about sixteen different ways.

The first way was if he let the doubt slide into his head. He'd made seven balls in a row, and I'd never seen him run more than four. He had the eight-ball to go—and that's the choke ball. If you're a choker, the eight will ram it right up your neck. He had to be thinking of a career of choking when the shot counted.

This game was like a bowler's 300—run the table starting from zero after the opponent has run off everything of his down to the eight. The perfect game. And this was the guy who until tonight had never felt worthy of winning even a slop game on Thursday night. Now he had five hundred bucks riding, was dressed like Jackie Gleason, smelled manlier than Joe Namath and Pete Rose combined. But was he *really* any different? Where it counts? In the belly?

Eight-ball to go. He'd committed himself—but had he done enough? Was there something more he should do?

I don't know if it was an ESP thing or not but, watching this small Irishman as he looked over the set-up, these thoughts buzzing around in my brain, his expression seemed to tie in with the thoughts. There was just the least muddiness in his eyes that had been so clear. I knew that look—knew it by feel, kind of. I'd felt it enough in my life. The look of doubt.

The man was a Doubter.

All us railbirds were quiet. Next to me, leaning on a fist, was the evil black beard of Pete. I glanced at Sal, standing quiet against the far wall, gazing at the set-up, no expression on his face. Near me Bennett also expressed nothing. Down a ways was Roper, off in space, and near him the goofy guy, looking goofy. And further down, past some other guys, was Mushy, rubbing his lips and looking like an insurance guy calculating a table of probabilities. Which was just what he was doing—if he *was* Mushy.

Delaney was taking his time. He tapped the handle of his stick slow and soft on the floor. I got it that he was looking at the doubt that had sneaked in on him. Not fighting it away, not yelling to himself, Hell, what's to doubt? Step up, knock that baby in right through all that long green! No, he had doubts, knew he had them, and was taking time to look them over, trying to figure how best to deal with them.

I guessed at what he was telling himself. "I've put things on the line and it's worked. I've played like never before and there's one shot to go—if I miss it the game's Sal's. And maybe I haven't done all I *can* do yet. Maybe before I'm *really* worthy of beating Sal I have to pass up this obvious shot—call another pocket—and by doing that set up a situation where I've got to reach way, way, way inside me for the best I have. If I do, it'll be there. If I don't, because of doubt that it's there, I'll know I deserve to lose, like I've known every time before when it counted. And, knowing that, I'll flub the shot."

That was how I figured he was working on the doubts. Whatever, the muddy look went out of his eyes. He took a stiff-legged walk around, sizing things up, then looked at Sal, and with his stick tapped lightly the corner pocket right behind the white ball.

Everybody murmured. Except me. And Roper, who was somewhere else. And Bennett, and Sal, and at the far end Mushy. All of whom had seen all kinds of calls and were beyond surprise at a call.

Sal gave a nod, acknowledging the call.

Pete breathed at me, "Why?"

"I guess he figures it's his best shot."

"Straight on's his best shot."

"Not if he don't feel it, it isn't."

Pete looked thoughtful and fingered his beard.

Delaney stood a little, studying the line. He'd try to bring the eight-ball down to the left edge of the far hole—a strong, smooth shot. The

cue ball should slide off the line as the eight-ball traveled down table, banked across the hole, came back the long diagonal. Hit just right, the eight-ball would find its line to the called pocket, continue on until it reached it, and bury itself.

And then Delaney would win five hundred dollars from Sal and know that by daring to reach inside for the best that was in him he'd paid his dues and now was a pool player.

He let out a long breath, laid his stick to the cue ball, bent, and sighted for the shot.

Sal and the rest of us were dead-still. Delaney, his shoulders relaxed, his wrist firm, drew back for the shot.

Then there was a jolting *bang*. And Delaney was flopping—flopping on the edge of the table and then down to the floor, going “Unhh?”

I whipped my head in the direction of the bang. I saw a pale, skinny woman's face under a dark hat. Strange black eyes, a mouth tight as a crease. A ratty-looking dark coat. The shine of hard metal.

Then the face, the coat, and the shine were gone.

Everybody was moving and yelling. I was blocked off. Pete was vaulting over the bar, yelling, “Get away from him!” Another guy was yelling the same and he and Bennett were pulling at guys, throwing them back. Everybody was yelling. I couldn't see anything. A guy got tossed into me—the goofy guy. He bounced off. I put my arms on the bar, hitched myself up on it, scrambled my legs around, got my knees on the bar, pushed the top of me vertical, and knelt there, looking at what I could see.

First I saw was the green of the table. On it, just as they had been, were the white ball and the eight-ball.

On the floor lay Delaney's stick and his spiffy dark hat. And beside them, him. On his stomach. There was a red mark in the middle of his new dark jacket.

There was space around him. Pete was closest to him. Guys had stopped yelling. They were jabbering. “What happened?”—“I dunno.”—“Somebody shot him.”—“Who?”—“I dunno.”—“Some woman.”—“Who?”—“Never seen her.”—“Where'd she go?”—“I dunno.”

Pete yelled, “Somebody call the cops!”

I was closest to the phone. I let myself down inside the bar, unhooked the phone, ran my eyes over the list of numbers alongside it, and called the cops.

I got back on the bar. Kneeling up again, I looked down it. Some guys had taken off. The guy who was probably Mushy was gone. Don't be where trouble's happened—so say the Mushys. You can't blame them. There's no good they can do standing around gawking. Cops on the way? Disappear.

Now Sal was over by Delaney, with Pete. Delaney's head was turned. I could see his profile. His skin was like it had gone very thin—and tight, like tight white silk, a blue tinge showing through the silk. I saw his eyelid flutter, then open. Pete, crouched at his head, yelled, "Shut up, everybody!"

And everybody realized that Delaney was alive, and maybe wanted to say something—and they got quiet.

Sal, down beside him, said. "How d'you feel?"

"Fine." His voice surprised me by being pretty strong—we could all hear. "Must of . . . What happened? I pass out?"

"You're O.K.," said Pete. "You'll be O.K."

"I . . . The excitement, I guess—not used to a game like that. That was really a game. Never played one like it . . . Sal? Is that you up there?"

"It's me, Delaney."

"I—I can't remember. Ashamed . . . I passed out . . . I knew I was going to make it. That's a great feeling, Sal, isn't it? Everything on the line and you reach for something in you—and get the feeling it's right, it's great, it's . . . You just feel you're going to make it."

"Yeah," said Sal. "It's a great feeling."

"I made it, didn't I? That long come-back double-bank?"

"You made it. It was a great shot."

"I knew the eight-ball'd drop. As I lined it up, I knew it. What a great feeling that is."

Now his voice wasn't so strong.

Sal put his hand light on Delaney's shoulder. "You're going to be fine."

"Now I am. From now on." His eyelid fluttered. "I feel very dizzy . . . Am I lying on the floor? That's dumb—I just bought this suit. Never had a new suit since high-school graduation . . . This is really dumb. You got a very dusty floor, Pete—is that you, Pete? Needs a good mopping . . . Never committed myself to anything . . . Help me up, Pete."

"Sure. In a second. I got a little kink in my hip right now." Pete knew

better than to move him. But something told me it didn't really matter. Move him or not—it didn't matter.

"O.K., we'll wait a minute then . . . So I really beat you, Sal?"

"You played a great game, Delaney." He was smoothing Delaney's shoulder, his hand very light.

"I challenged you, the great Sal . . . I put it all on the line, like old what's-his-name told me to. It was Angie's money, but I took the chance. Didn't ask her. She'd've gone into one of her tailspins. But now she gets back twice what I took . . . She'll be so happy . . . Lawyer says for a grand he can get the kid's charge dropped to a misdemeanor—try, anyway. She's been saving up. Rotten kid, but he's her kid, you can't blame her . . ." His voice was fading, wandering around. Sal continued to smooth his shoulder. "Good woman, hard life, finally I do something really make her happy . . . Risk your dream, make a commitment . . . Always knew I was good at pool but it was a dream . . . Sorry about your hip, Pete. You shouldn't lift that heavy stuff, you're probably not as strong as you think . . . Now it's not a dream any more . . . I really am a very good pool play—"

Suddenly he stopped talking. Sal moved, and I could see Delaney's profile. His eye stayed open. It stayed like that and went empty.

Sal said softly, "Oh, God."

He got up. Pete got up too.

Bennett said in a quiet voice, "Is he dead?"

Sal said, sounding very tired, "I guess so."

We were all quiet. I looked at Delaney's bluish face and his half-open eye stayed like that.

Roper's voice said suddenly, "Dead? Who's dead?"

"Delaney," somebody muttered.

"Delaney? Dead? You're nuts! Nobody's dead! What the hell is this? Have you all gone nuts?"

Pete had him around the shoulders. "It's O.K., Roper. Just go along home now, O.K.?"

He walked him toward the back door, Roper yelling, "Everybody in this goddamn dump is nuts! What kind of dumb joke is that, saying Delaney's dead? Nobody's dead. Delaney's fine. Is somebody trying to be funny? I don't think it's a damn bit funny!"

"You're right," said Pete. "It isn't." He got him out the door.

Then the cops came in the front door . . .

I was at Pete's next afternoon. Pete was at the bar, and a couple of guys I didn't know were sitting down at the far end. Pete was near the front end, talking with Bill Rodney.

The linoleum floor gave off a gleam, which was a rarity. It's not often the floor gets mopped.

Rodney is an older plainclothes cop who's an infrequent but pretty good pool player, at three or five dollars.

I sat next to him and Pete gave me my ale and said, "Rodney says they picked up the woman."

"No," said Rodney. "I said she turned herself in."

"Angie?" I said.

"That's her name—Angie Dow. Do you know her?"

"She was his girl friend," said Pete. "That's what Rodney says. I never knew he had one."

Rodney nodded. "She worked at Bunny's Café in San Belcarlo. About forty or forty-five, lived with her son there in an old apartment on El Cerrito. She told us Delaney lived there too off and on, had his own key—but he still kept his room here in Lindenvale. The kid's a doper. Angie's got a mental history—would pill up a lot, freak out. Things'd get in a mess and Delaney would take off for his place. She hasn't told us yet where she got the gun. It was a .38. Probably one her son stole."

I said, "So she shot Delaney because he took the money she'd been saving for the son's lawyer."

Rodney got a surprised look. "Who said that?"

"Delaney did," said Pete. "Anyway, he said the money he put up was Angie's."

Rodney took a hit from his highball. "That's news to me. He *did* have a bundle in his wallet—over six hundred dollars. But she didn't say anything to us about money. She said she shot him because he had another woman."

Pete and I looked at each other.

We spoke at the same time. "Who?"

"She didn't know. But for the past couple of weeks he'd been around only a little—told her he had something on his mind, had to work it out. Then yesterday on her break she saw him getting in a cab downtown on Third Avenue, in front of Sturbridge's, that big men's store, all dressed up—new suit, hat, shoes—so she knew he had another woman. He'd never gotten dressed up for her."

We didn't say anything.

He went on, "She thought about it all afternoon at work, then went home, probably took some pills—then she got the gun, like I said, probably the son's. She came up to Lindenvale, went to Delaney's rooming house, then started looking in the bars. She thought she'd find him with the woman. She came in here. She didn't see the woman but he was all slicked up so she knew he was going to meet her someplace, was just passing time. She said she wanted to follow him till he met the woman and kill them both, but seeing him like that, all slick and smooth, something took over and, before she knew it, she'd pulled the trigger and shot him."

Sal came in the door. He gave us a tight smile, sat down next to Rodney, got a screwdriver from Pete.

He asked Rodney what the cops had turned up.

Sal said he didn't know Delaney had had a girl friend.

Rodney took down his drink. "And I guess none of you guys know who the other woman is."

He got only headshakes.

"Well, whoever she is, she's lucky she wasn't with him when Angie caught up."

We kind of murmured. I didn't know Sal's and Pete's thinking. I didn't think Delaney had dressed up for another woman. It was part of his commitment, putting his dream in the open. But what did I know? Maybe Angie was right, maybe he did have another woman. He was a very private little guy.

Rodney gave us a general goodbye and left.

I said to Sal, "Would he have made that long come-back shot?"

"You can't know. I was pulling that he would."

Pete couldn't quite buy that.

"Easy to say now."

"Yeah, I know. It's the truth though."

His raspy voice softened and so did his eyes. "A guy gets the flash that it's time to stop fooling around, ducking, being scared—time to go to your talent, do your best, let it take you wherever it'll go. I saw it happen to Delaney last night, like a long time ago it happened to me."

I said, "A guy of forty-five finally puts his dream on the line."

Pete said, "O.K.—but five hundred bucks is five hundred bucks."

Sal gave his loud sudden laugh. "He'd just have borrowed it. I'd have got it back. If not right away, next time, or another time."

Pete said, "It seemed like . . . Well, when he was lying there talking, it was like—things were O.K. with him."

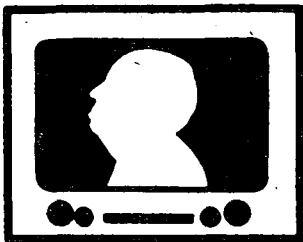
We didn't say anything, didn't touch glasses or anything, but we all took a swallow to him—a guy who'd made his commitment just in time, and got at peace with himself.

Which is the way I'd like to go. Though it don't seem very likely. Because my dream blew away a long time ago. And now there's nothing to put on the line.



IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE—

You won't want to miss the special ALFRED HITCHCOCK PHOTOQUIZ by Peter Christian—32 pages of pictures from the Master's major movies, with quiz captions. A tribute to the zest and art that was Alfred Hitchcock's alone!



CRIME ON SCREEN

by Peter Christian

Long before the demon barber of Fleet Street burst into song via a Broadway musical, an English stage and film star had made the role of Sweeney Todd his own for some three decades. That actor was the celebrated but now forgotten Tod Slaughter, well named (Slaughter was his real family name) and devoted to the mysterious and the bizarre, as synonymous with villainy in his day in England as we might associate Boris Karloff with sinister parts here. But, unlike Karloff and all the other familiar horror stars—Lugosi, both Chaney's, Atwill—all of whom occasionally went against type to play basically kindly characters, or red herrings, or at least not the guilty party at the end, the magnificent Tod Slaughter *always* portrayed an evil person. And with flair.

Born in 1884, and an early convert to the theater, Slaughter during an active career was involved in more than five hundred movies and stage plays. Only a pitiful few of the films survive to this day, so we have only a limited opportunity to study this master at work: snorting, leering, chewing scenery with relish, single-handedly preserving the bloody traditions of British melodrama.

Dominating the hundreds of villains he portrayed from Landru to Jack the Ripper, however, was Sweeney Todd, the popular favorite of the patrons of the grim old Elephant Theatre—in the shabbiest depths of South London—which Slaughter had taken over and converted into a temple of blood, reviving English thrill plays. The murderous barber, approaching each unsuspecting patron with gleaming razor, chortles: "*I'll just polish you off, sir.*" It became the Slaughter catch-phrase.

Famed, as well, was the innovative set Slaughter constructed for his

Sweeney Todd revival at the Elephant. It was two-tiered, allowing a gleeful audience to watch as the victims of Todd's barber-chair plummet through a trapdoor down to the ghastly cellar below—a good eight-foot drop. Spectators to Slaughter productions had the cozy satisfaction of knowing exactly what to expect: rich drama played to the very hilt, buckets of blood, lots of physical jousting about (stranglings, stabbings, and shootings, for instance) done with the precision of ballet but also the abandon of a free-for-all.

For example, the way in which Todd finally does away with his accomplice, the pie-woman Mrs. Lovett, has become a Slaughter legend. It starts with a quarrel over spoils in that terrible cellar, with the two knocking each other about literally from wall to wall. Lovett finally breaks free and makes a dash for safety up the cellar steps. Just as she reaches the top, Todd shoots her; she tumbles back down and staggers to the footlights. Collapsing, she allows her hair to dangle into the orchestra pit and the audience to get a full view of her throat as Todd approaches, chuckling, with his razor. And he *then* stuffs her into the famous oven!

But virtue, though oft betrayed, always triumphed at the end of these dramas; audiences insisted on only one outcome in the struggle between Good and Evil. And, just so that the lines were most carefully drawn, the villains in these dramas were *always* lit with a green spot for easy identification. Slaughter, the resident producer-villain, was because of this tradition eternally in the lime light.

In transferring his stage successes to the screen, Slaughter toned down none of his wild-eyed theatrics. Just to inform audiences of exactly what he is capable, he walks through the film version of *Sweeney Todd* crooning: "Black beards, red beards, I've polished them all off; lovely lot of throats." In *The Greed of William Hart*, a retelling of the Burke and Hare killings, the acrobatic murder of the friendly halfwit Daft Jamie is shudderingly detailed on screen, a moving moment in melodrama. Slaughter's first film, *Maria Marten, or The Murder in the Red Barn*, is actually a century-old stage drama about a wicked squire who gets rid of a pregnant servant girl in order to marry a landowner's daughter. Slaughter is the squire "whose blood may be blue but whose heart is black."

Slaughter also tried a reworking of Wilkie Collins' classic, *The Woman in White*, calling it *Crimes of the Dark House*—and the title change is in this case quite reasonable as the story no longer centers on the two lookalike half sisters, one of them in an asylum, but concentrates on the

venomous Sir Percival Glyde, laughing with gusto after each murder. In *The Curse of the Wraydons* Slaughter is "Springheeled Jack, the Terror of London," another classic penny-dreadful figure. A pre-credit explanation at the head of *The Face at the Window* points to itself as "a melodrama of the old school, dear to the hearts of all who unashamedly enjoy either a shudder or a laugh at the heights of villainy." In *Face*, Slaughter is a respected banker who by night sends out his bestial foster-brother (who spends most of his time caged in a secret cellar) to kill.

It was rare for Slaughter not to dominate his films, but in *Sexton Blake and the Hooded Terror* he is the latter, a Moriarty-figure to Blake, a British boys'-paper imitation Sherlock Holmes. Although leading an international band of Chinese thugs, bursting with evil intent ("With those I am about to shoot I enjoy exchanging pleasantries") and terrorizing the heroine quite flamboyantly ("So young, so beautiful, and yet you choose death—an unknown death which will creep upon you unawares"), Slaughter seemed uncomfortable with this second billing; he needed that green spotlight squarely upon him. Most of his films and plays had him center stage. His *Sweeney Todd* was unstoppable: he returned to it for decades, and even toured British army bases with it during and after the war. British film producer Richard Gordon (of the recent, excellent *Cat and the Canary*) recalls as a youngster during World War II seeing a Slaughter production during which air-raid sirens scarcely stopped the actor, being pursued by the police into the audience in some crime spectacular.

Slaughter died in theatrical harness (his hobby, he told the British Players' Directory, was *to work*) in 1956, at age 72, evil squire to the end. He had delighted generations of audiences—and even some critics. Graham Greene had written in *The Spectator* of 1939, when as a film critic he reviewed *The Face in the Window*, that "Mr. Tod Slaughter is certainly one of our finest living actors . . . at whose feet Mr. Laughton must have sat—that dancing sinister step, that raised shoulder and flickering eyelid." (Actually, many critics had compared Slaughter to Charles Laughton, as the only actor who could out-leer him.) One could tell, Greene thought, that Slaughter "really believes in good and evil, in a morality which has the tradition of a thousand years behind it." A Slaughter film was "just fine chaps putting on a good show." Tod Slaughter himself, chuckling as he sharpens his razor, grimacing in his great coat as he stalks the alleys, beaming while awaiting the green light for murder, would be the first to agree.

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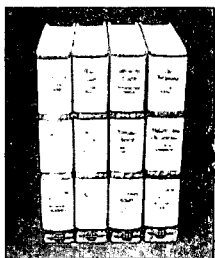
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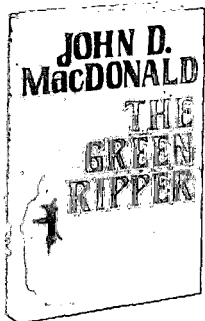
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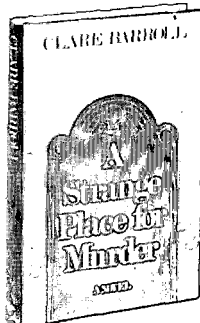
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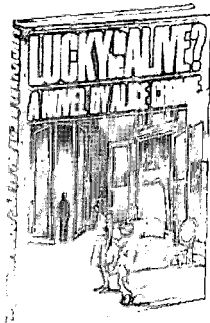
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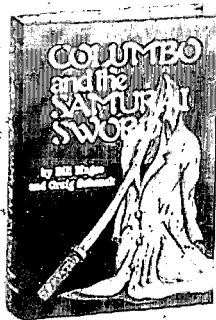
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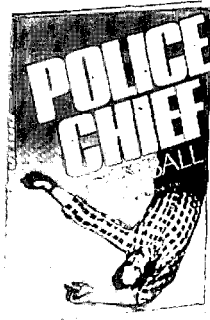
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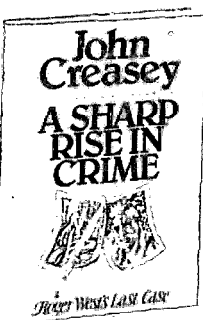
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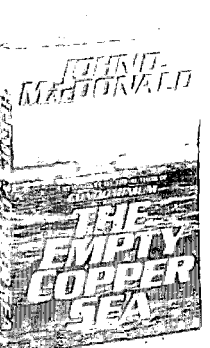
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